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The Shah's Last Toady—*Fouad Ajami*

JAMES WOLCOTT ON JAY MCINERNEY · JAMES S. HENRY: WHO ARE THE TAX CHEATS?

CLE SAM'S
ANK SALE:
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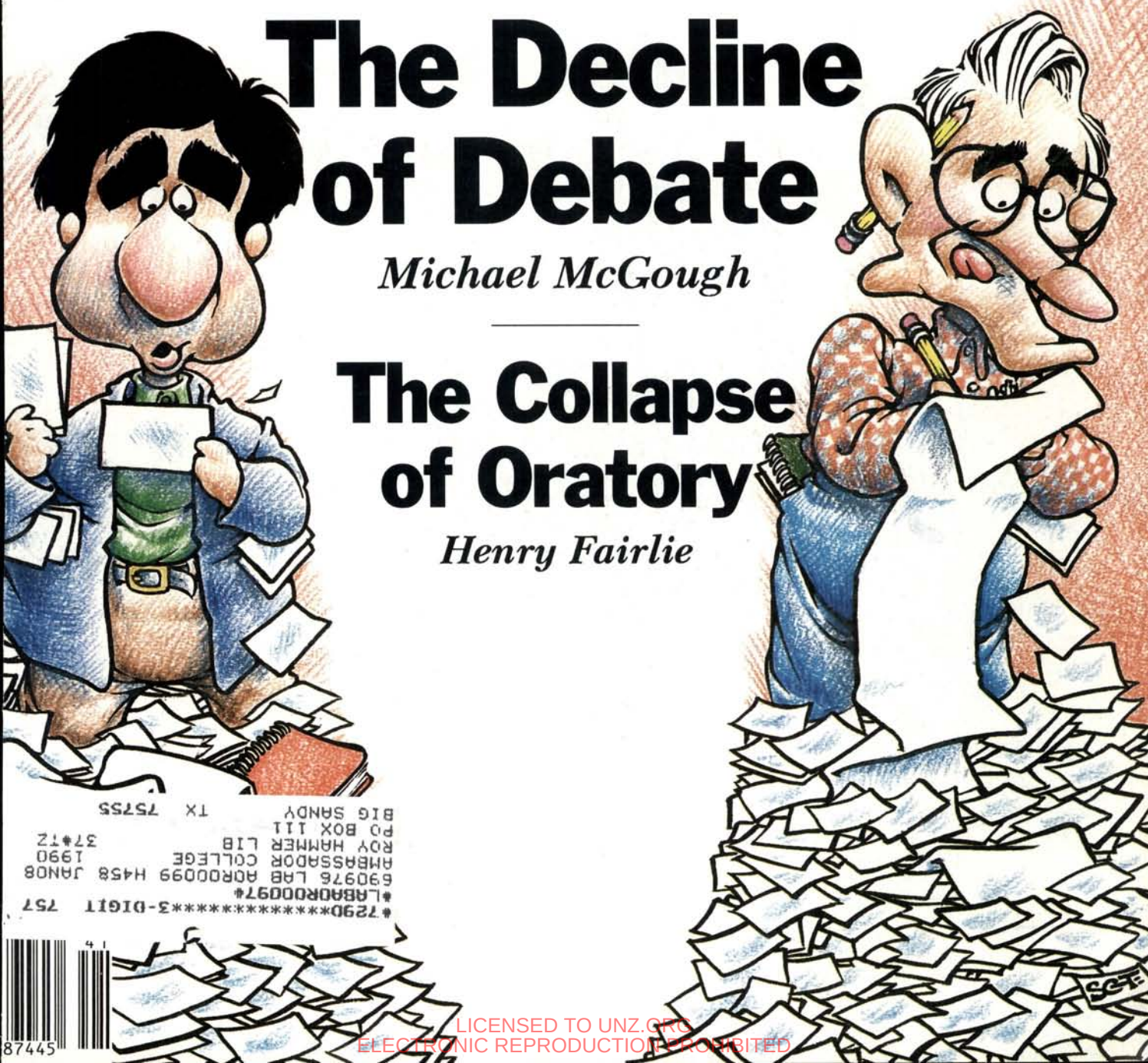
'SANE!

THE NEW REPUBLIC



The Decline of Debate

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FOUNDED 1914 — *A Weekly Journal of Opinion* — ISSUE 3,847

WASHINGTON, D.C. — OCTOBER 10, 1988

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FROM WASHINGTON

Blow Your House Down

The good burghers of Yonkers, New York, say they are not racists for opposing the construction of primarily black public housing in their primarily white middle-class neighborhoods. They say their real concern is real estate values. Actually, I believe them. Or at least, I find it plausible.

According to one Yonkers real estate agent, a three-bedroom house purchased for $18,000 to $30,000 in the mid-1950s would sell for ten times as much today. For these generally blue-collar homeowners, this unexpected bonanza represents most of their net worth. (Nationally, real estate is 60 to 70 percent of the average person's net worth.) The realtor's estimate that public housing might knock ten percent off of nearby house prices, even without any panic selling, hardly seems wild. And it hardly seems necessary to look beyond the loss of $25,000 or so per homeowner to explain why Yonkers almost let a federal judge drive their town bankrupt last month rather than submit.

Thus the real significance of the Yonkers episode may be as another illustration of how our society is being twisted and torn by the enormous run-up in real estate prices since World War II, and especially in the past decade.

There are signs the run-up may be over, and growing nervousness—fed by an influential *Barron's* article last August—that real estate may be heading for a crash. Nationally house prices are still rising, but just barely. The median price of an existing home rose 3.7 percent during the year ending in July. That's less than inflation, and much less than the average owner's mortgage rate. Certain areas, such as Washington, D.C., and California, continue to soar, but Houston has already suffered a Black Monday-sized 24 percent collapse.

The main reason to think a real estate crash might be coming is the huge and growing gap between the cost of owning a house and the cost of renting one. House prices have gone up twice as fast as rents for the past two decades. A four-bedroom house in a fancy Washington suburb, which might have cost $400,000 last year, would fetch $500,000 today. An identical house can be rented for $2,400 a month. With mortgage payments, property taxes, insurance, and foregone income on the down payment, the cost of buying a house in Washington is more than double the cost of renting one.

Why would someone pay twice as much to live in the same house? Yes, there are tax benefits, but not nearly enough to explain the differential. The romance of home ownership may be part of it. However, the main reason is clearly the belief that prices will keep going up. Ultimately, though, a house's only value is what it is worth to live in. When up to half of today's price is simply a bet that tomorrow's price will be even higher, you have a classic speculative bubble. As investors in pyramid schemes throughout the ages have learned—and as stock market investors were reminded last year—the "greater fool" theory can't be right forever.

Of course, people have been saying this about real estate for years, and have always been wrong, so far. What's the evidence this time is any different? First, there's the current price slowdown, which comes when times are generally good and interest rates are relatively low. A market that's counting on future increases to support today's prices can turn a slowdown into a rout pretty quickly.

Second, there's tax reform that, by slicing marginal tax rates, made tax deductions less valuable, and thereby increased the after-tax cost of home ownership. The effect of this is still just beginning to sink in.

Third, there are 28 percent more houses on the market than a year ago. That's ominous. The pool of empty nesters who've decided to cash out of houses they no longer need may be growing, but the pool of baby boomers who can afford today's prices is not. Comstock Partners, a New York financial firm that is spreading the real estate crash scare, advises everybody with big real estate profits, even those who still need a house, to sell out and rent. I certainly lack the courage to take this advice, and I know of only one family that has done so. But if even a small fraction of homeowners becomes persuaded that prices are about to topple, then they'll be right: prices will topple.

A real estate crash would be far more traumatic than the stock market crash. Not only do people have more invested in their houses than in stocks, but that investment is heavily leveraged through mortgages. A 25 percent drop in house prices would wipe out millions of homeowners' entire investment. Furthermore, especially after Black Monday, people have come to see their houses as a financial haven as well as a physical one. The September 26 *Time* magazine, reporting how small investors have fled the stock market following the crash, quotes one: "I only want solid things, like real estate."

No one knows to what extent the consumer boom of recent years has been fed by people's belief that their houses were making them rich. A real estate nosedive might easily lead to the recession the stock market crash did not. The Federal Reserve might find itself desperately pumping up the money supply to stop the slide, thereby producing the very inflation homeowners are implicitly counting on.

On the other hand, a decline in house prices, if not a crash, would be a healthy development. Who would really be harmed? Not young people who haven't yet bought a home. In 1950 it cost 14 percent of the average 30-year-old's income to buy the median home. Today it costs 44 percent. At those levels, many can't even qualify for a mortgage. The fraction of Americans owning homes has dropped less than one percent (to 64 percent) since 1974, but an increase among older people disguises a large drop among younger ones.

Younger and middle-aged people who do own homes are either going to live in them for many more years or trade them for other homes, probably larger. Regional variations may affect them, but the general level of house prices should not. The house they sell and the house they buy will go up or down together.

The group that would be hurt by a downturn in house prices is older people selling their last house. But these folks are likely to have bought for a small fraction of today's prices. It's rough justice if they make a smaller profit and home ownership becomes more affordable for young people.

The bloated prices of existing houses may make the owners feel rich, but they add nothing to the nation's wealth. A house is exactly the same house after it doubles in "value." In fact, as my favor-

continued on page 41

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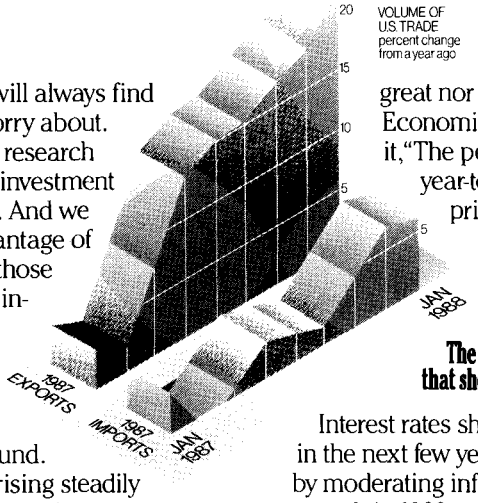
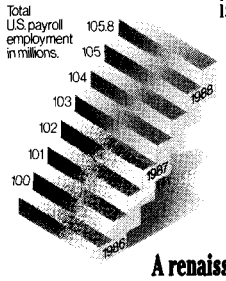
With so many things to worry about why are we so optimistic?



Those inclined to worry will always find things in the economy to worry about. But the fact is, Merrill Lynch research shows that many untapped investment opportunities are unfolding. And we believe the time to take advantage of them has arrived. Here are those trends. And what the astute investor can do about them.

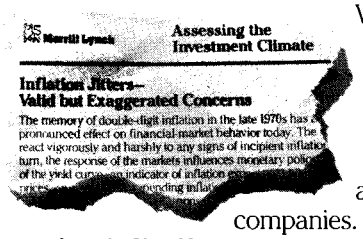
Economic forecast: up, down, then up again.

The basic economy is sound. Personal income has been rising steadily for the last few years. The unemployment rate is near a 9-year low, and the gross national product is advancing at a healthy pace. While our research shows the possibility of a recession next year, it should be modest in length and degree. And economic growth should resume by the end of 1989.



A renaissance of optimism for U.S. capital spending.

The American economy is undergoing a major change: the Industrial Renaissance. Exports are growing strongly. That means a rise in orders for American capital goods and an excellent long-term opportunity to profit from the rebuilding of our industrial base.


Merrill Lynch
Assessing the Investment Climate
Inflation Jitters—
Valid but Exaggerated Concerns
The memory of double-digit inflation in the late 1970s has a
pronounced effect on financial-market behavior today. The
react vigorously and harshly to any signs of incipient inflatio
turn, the response of the markets influences monetary polic
of the yield cur
indicator of inflation

We also see emerging opportunities in selected high-yielding stocks such as those of utilities and insurance companies. And, as Merrill Lynch Chief Investment Strategist Charles I. Clough points out, "Foreign investment flows into dollar-denominated financial assets are likely to be increasingly supportive of the U.S. financial markets."

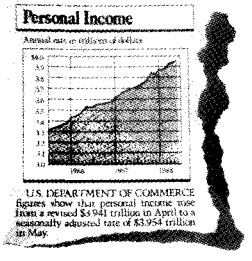
Inflation is up. But not severely.

While the drought in the Midwest is boosting food prices, the overall effect should be neither great nor long-lasting. As our Chief Economist Don Straszheim puts it, "The peak inflation rate, based on year-to-year changes in consumer prices, is likely to be about 5.5%, far below the 14.5% peak in the second quarter of 1980."

The interest rate outlook: something that should make everyone feel optimistic.

Interest rates should decline substantially in the next few years. This would be spurred by moderating inflation, slower economic growth in 1989, and a rising surplus in the Social Security trust fund, which will make the government a bigger customer for its own debt, reducing the amount it must raise from the public.

This means that U.S. Treasury bonds and high-quality corporate and municipal bonds—which are now paying healthy interest rates—are also likely to increase considerably in value.


Personal Income
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE figures show that personal income rose from a revised $3.941 trillion in April to a seasonally adjusted rate of $3.954 trillion in May.

We believe the time to act is now.

For a fuller discussion of these opportunities, ask for our research report titled, "Unfolding Opportunities Amid Diminishing Expectations." Write Merrill Lynch Response Center, P.O. Box 30200, New Brunswick, New Jersey 08989-0200, or call 1-800-637-7455, ext. 7066, or contact your Merrill Lynch Financial Consultant.

We stand ready with specific investment recommendations.

Because once again we're saying, with some pride and no little pleasure, something you may have heard from us before:

Merrill Lynch is bullish on America.

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A tradition of trust.

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CORRESPONDENCE

NO TRUCK WITH DEMOCRATS

To the editors:
I was greatly disturbed by the cognitive dissonance exhibited by TNR. You consistently espouse conservative positions, particularly on foreign policy, and yet you summarily dismiss the Republicans as your party of choice in November. Martin Peretz expresses significant reservations about the Democratic Party ("A (Dissident) Democrat's Lament," August 29). But his cursory dismissal of the Republicans ("morally, I have no truck with [them]") proves a weak link in an otherwise provocative and honest piece. While, like most 1980s conservatives, he cannot stomach the Republicans' antediluvian stance on social issues, I seriously doubt that he finds "truck" with the party of Jesse Jackson, unilateral disarmament, and the Blame America First crowd. How can such a pro-Israel publication support a party that would not bring the issue of a Palestinian state to a vote because they feared the result?

Why does TNR have so much trouble vocalizing its true affinity with the Republicans? What ails TNR is a new affliction that I call the "We're-Intellectuals-We-Must-Be-Liberals Syndrome." However, this obligation to the Democratic Party stemming from higher education no longer holds water. C'mon, wake up and smell the coffee! TNR, "once the proudest organ of American liberalism" (*New York Times* op-ed page, August 2), now plays the conservative tune. If you are going to think conservative, you should at least vote that way.

TEVI D. TROY
Ithaca, New York

EASTERN CIVILIZATION

To the editors:
In "Canon Fodder" (August 22), Nathan Glazer argues that the Western civilization curriculum reforms initiated by blacks at Stanford will not help them achieve their "underlying" goals of increasing their representation at elite universities and improving their academic performance. As blacks, Stanford graduates, and readers who appreciate a well-reasoned argument, we find this article both presumptuous and insulting. Glazer presumes the goals of the reformers and then proceeds through a series of questionable logical steps to show that the reforms will not help blacks meet "their" goals. Furthermore, Glazer insults black students by suggesting that they seek to compensate for academic difficulties by changing curricula. He misses the fundamental point that there are reasons for blacks to reform curricula that have little, if anything, to do with enhancing representation or performance. The primary motivation would be to increase *all* students' understanding of the contributions of minority cultures. This would presumably lead to an increase in respect for minority cultures and the minorities themselves. However, the benefits of curriculum reform would by no means be limited to minorities. Exposure to non-European cultures can only help all students as they move into leadership roles in an increasingly interdependent, predominantly non-Caucasian world.

JEFF A. WASHINGTON
San Diego, California
BRIAN E. WASHINGTON
San Francisco, California

To the editors:
One wonders what country Nathan Glazer is thinking of when he writes, "Blacks play a central role in American history and culture; Hispanic and Asian Americans do not." Perhaps the United States of Massachusetts. Out here in the USA, we live in a country that annexed half of Mexico and its population in the 1840s and that has been dealing with bicultural issues ever since. Our railways, which brought our country together, were built heavily with Asian labor. Hispanics and Asians are prominent in our arts, our business, and our politics. We would be happy to welcome Professor Glazer any time for a visit.

JOHN ISBISTER
Santa Cruz, California

A PANHANDLER'S PRIDE

To the editors:
Just what we need: a responsible social critic like Hendrik Hertzberg lending his support to the notion that "panhandling *is* a job" (Washington Diarist, "Cross Talk," August 22). This is precisely the sort of thinking that has helped begging to catch on in the first place. Take a good look at the people who ask for money on New York's streets and subways, and you'll realize that, for many of them, begging is not a last, desperate resort but a preferable alternative to working or a form of income supplement. In *New York* (August 29), Eric Pooley quotes a beggar as telling him, "I could go into a McDonald's this minute and get a job, but I feel I have some type of self-worth." When people are too proud to work at McDonald's, but not too proud to beg, the meaning of pride itself has been convoluted. This widespread perversion of the concept of pride over the past couple of decades is the main reason why there are more beggars in our cities.

As for Hertzberg's habit of handing out a quarter to everyone who asks him for one, I congratulate him (a print journalist!) for having all that change to spare. But then I wonder how long his money would hold out if he tried to carry out this policy in New York instead of Washington. I think it would be much better spent on contributing to research on cancer or AIDS.

BRUCE BAWER
New York, New York

WEEP THE HARVEST

To the editors:
Senator Tom Harkin writes, "Farm programs are not motivated by sympathy or mushy sentimentalism, but by national self-interest" ("The Family Farmer," Correspondence, August 29). He then appeals to the readers' sympathy by saying, "I'm sure most Americans would rather trust control of their food production to thousands of family farmers than to a few corporate conglomerates." I would trust control of my food production to whoever can produce the best food most economically. With today's modern technology, family farms are simply impractical.

NOAH MEYERSON
Bethesda, Maryland

The editors welcome correspondence from readers. Letters should include the writer's full name, address, and telephone number; be typed double-spaced; and be held to under 200 words. Letters may be edited for space. Please address letters to: Correspondence, TNR, 1220 19th Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

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THE NEW REPUBLIC
OCTOBER 10, 1988

DUKAKIS'S DECEPTIONS

We can't decide which of Michael Dukakis's back-to-back photo opportunities was more embarrassing. First, while visiting the General Dynamics proving ground, he dressed up like GI Joe, climbed up on an M1 tank, and manned a 30mm machine gun. Two days later, while visiting Yellowstone Park, he donned crisp khaki pants, suede outdoorsy jacket, and unscuffed Timberland boots—kind of a Euell Gibbons Sunday-go-to-meeting outfit. Some politicians look natural playing this sort of dress up. Why did Dukakis look so silly? One reason is that he is, for lack of a better term, a nerdy-looking guy, not cut out for the Clint Eastwood roles. Another reason is that building a presidential campaign on visual symbols is easier for Republicans than for Democrats. The conservative message, after all, is a simple one, readily conveyed without heavy reliance on words: free up the private sector and trust in God and country. But liberals (especially those Harvard liberals) are expected to have a more nuanced message, complete with carefully thought-out programs. Liberals are *supposed* to look silly playing soldier for photographers.

So why did Dukakis do it? How has he been reduced to running the essentially symbolic (and largely negative) campaign that George Bush seems to prefer? Does it mean that after eight years of meditation, liberalism still hasn't found its message? Or that in Dukakis the liberal message hasn't found its voice? We may soon find out. There are signs that Dukakis is beginning to conduct a more substantive campaign, using his well-chosen visual backdrops to frame the presentation of real policy proposals. Will he have anything worthwhile to say? No and yes.

Dukakis's stack of position papers is large, but a number of them hold less than meets the eye. He has a tendency (not rare among politicians) to act as if a problem has been solved once he's thought up a name for the committee that's going to look into it. When it comes to drugs and crime, for example, his campaign literature promises that he will "create and personally chair a National Anti-Crime Council; appoint an Anti-Drug Czar to lead a National Alliance Against Drugs . . ." And so on, with the obligatory nod toward tougher law enforcement and better drug education.

Even when Dukakis does get specific, he is sometimes prone to stereotypically liberal softheadedness. Consider the poverty problem. He has touted Massachusetts's Employment and Training Choices program (ET) as the best exemplar of workfare, but in fact ET doesn't even qualify as workfare. Workfare, as commonly defined, tells welfare recipients that if they don't go to work, they won't get any money. The government then promises to help, providing job training or even a job. As Mickey Kaus noted in this journal (see "The Work Ethic State," TNR, July 7, 1986), ET makes participation voluntary, leaving wide open the option of sitting at home and collecting a check. And although ET is well managed, Dukakis's claim that it has moved 50,000 people off welfare and into jobs is misleading, at best.

The trouble with ET is the failure to recognize that poverty is not just a problem of unequal job skills. It is a problem also of unmarried women, including many teenagers, having children they can't support. Between 1986 and 1987 the number of white people in poverty declined, while the number of black people in poverty grew by 700,000. During roughly the same 12-month period, more than 175,000 black children were born to *adult* unwed mothers with household incomes below $10,000 (including any welfare payments). The number of births to unwed teenagers is less clear, but there's no doubt that if you added them in, a big part of the growing black poverty problem would be seen to consist of poor children being born under circumstances almost guaranteed to keep them poor.

One virtue of workfare—*real* workfare—is that it sends a harsh but healthy message to poor single women: you're going to have to work for your money even if you have children only one or two years old, so getting pregnant is only going to complicate your life. Both candidates, to their credit, have now endorsed the essence of the Moyni-

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han welfare bill, which, though flawed, is close enough to real workfare to at least begin welfare reform. But neither Bush nor Dukakis has talked honestly about the problem of the black underclass. And Dukakis is being disingenuous when he acts as if ET offers the solution.

On the broader economic front, Dukakis also has a cure-all. The cornerstone of his pledge to produce "good jobs at good wages" is the Fund to Rebuild America (FRA), which would divide $500 million among depressed areas as seed money for regional development projects. The underlying philosophy is sound enough: the federal government should (*a*) help keep huge disparities out of the regional distribution of prosperity and (*b*) help take the sting out of the economic restructuring necessitated by changes in technology and in the global division of labor. The trouble is that past attempts at regional policy—the Economic Development Agency, Urban Development Action Grants—have turned into pork barrel extravaganzas, with benefits flowing to areas whose political representatives had amassed the most IOUs from Washington. The same is true of the current Job Training Partnership Act program that Dan Quayle, its co-author, is bragging about on the campaign trail.

The FRA's purported defense against pork is that it requires large state and local matching funds, so mayors and congressmen won't lightly angle for subsidies. (This "highly leveraged" aspect of FRA is also supposed to explain how only a half billion dollars is going to produce millions of jobs.) Further, regions designated for aid will have to requalify periodically, so you won't see a replay of the Economic Development Agency, which, through accretion, wound up defining 80 percent of the nation as eligible for "special" assistance.

Nonetheless, pork will inevitably creep into FRA. That would be tolerable if the program were used to fend off protectionist pressure from labor unions that complain (justifiably) about the toll of economic transition on the working class. But Dukakis, sadly, isn't using the idea this

THE ZEITGEIST CHECKLIST

BY CHARLES PAUL FREUND

This Week		Last Week	Weeks on Chart
1.	TANKS ANYWAY	1	12
2.	STORMY WEATHER	—	1
3.	MODEST PROPOSALS	4	2
4.	COUPS DE VILLES	—	1
5.	DEATH WISH	*	2
6.	DEATHLESS PROS	5	4
7.	DADA'S HOME	*	4
8.	KURDS IN THE WAY	—	1
9.	SOMETHING IN THE AIR	2	8
10.	WHAT GOES AROUND ...	—	1

The race. Dukakis's problem has not been his liberalism, it's been his failure to characterize himself. Politics abhors a vacuum; if you don't fill out your own persona, somebody does it for you. Worse, Duke has allowed Bush to catch the leftward social wind (child care, environment, labor questions, etc.), while he chases Bush rightward. He isn't going to catch him by riding in tanks.

Weather. If the media had known all along that Gilbert would merely strike Mexico, would they have given it a tenth of the attention? Mexicans died in large enough numbers to revive the suddenly becalmed story, but then misery is their role. Compare Gilbert-in-Mexico to last fall's storm in Britain, which felled a lot of trees, to judge culturally based storm coverage.

Abortion. The fetal tissue debate is taking place at a distance from the abortion question. "We've got the tissue," is one attitude, "why not put it to good use?" Iphigenia's dad might have said the same. The point is, a fetal tissue market creates a new incentive to abort, a commercial one yet. Surrogate motherhood tripped on commercialism; this may too.

Coups. The winds of freedom blow in strange directions. God knows what will help Haiti. Burma is another matter. Inspiring as it is to hear about people power, this "news" is what's known in the propaganda trade as "horizontal integration": we see what we want to believe. Is Burma capable of democracy as we know it? What remains of the country's economic structure and its middle class?

Guns. There must be some argument that Congress retains its integrity, but in the wake of the gun vote it's hard to remember it. Nobody wants to disarm the country, but can't we make it a bit harder for the Hinckleys to shoot the Reagans? If anyone's looking for new reasons to become politically apathetic, this vote is a pretty good one.

Olympics. Chris Evert is in the Olympics, is she? The Olympics' old distinction between pro and amateur may have been pure hypocrisy, but it was a distinction. The moneyfying of the games has made it an impossible one to maintain. Are they going to acknowledge the politics too? These games are gradually turning into an international Super Bowl.

The post-Reagan library. Now come *Landslide* and *On Bended Knee* to describe a Dada nation, its gaga presidency and a cowed electronic media. Given what a recipe for political disaster this is, we ought to thank Reagan's handlers. The last eight years could have been a lot worse.

Kurds. Are the Kurds establishing themselves in the West's consciousness? Ignored except as corpses in April, their plight and long history are now emerging. They're even part of the weird Palme murder mystery. The attention Kurds have gotten in elite media such as the *New York Review of Books* is already bleeding into the middlebrow press.

Environment. Radon doesn't seem to be anybody's fault, but its return as a bigger-than-ever problem feeds the steadily growing environment consciousness. Indeed, every angle of the diffuse environment story is playing louder each time it resurfaces. Around the corner: return of the garbage glut.

Cassingles. The seven-inch single hit record, that is to say the basis of modern leisure and culture, has been in a long sales slump, and seemed dead. Efforts to revive it in CD have gone nowhere. Suddenly, however, cassette singles—cassingles—have taken off, preserving civilization as it was meant to be. After all, where would we be without countdown lists?

*Item resurfaces in the Zeitgeist after at least one week's absence.

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way. On the contrary, he's playing on sentiments of economic nationalism, talking about "conditional" protectionism, to be doled out to industries that vow to retool and face the future bravely. We hope this is mere campaign rhetoric, and that, if elected, Dukakis will remember by January that protectionism is easier to start than to stop.

Dukakis's approach to expanding health insurance—simply require employers to provide it—is deficient but excusable. It amounts to a hidden tax on consumers, and is probably less efficient than funding the insurance straightforwardly, through a federal tax. But in the present political climate, he may be right in believing that you have to sneak through the back door to reach worthwhile goals. If nothing else, mandated health insurance is guaranteed to pay for itself.

Buried within Dukakis's hype-heavy position papers are some genuinely good ideas. His college loan plan, which commits all recipients to a fixed, lifelong payroll tax, would make the loan system self-supporting and would have valuable side effects; because repayment would be proportional to income, the burden of paying for college wouldn't steer professionals away from low-paying but socially worthwhile jobs like teaching. Also laudable is Dukakis's support of the mainstream liberal initiatives of the past year—a substantial minimum-wage hike and plant closing legislation, for example. These issues draw a clear distinction between him and Bush and serve to remind us of what liberalism is: the belief that government has a legitimate, assertive role to play in economic life, especially in fine tuning the trade-off between efficiency and equality. Whether this reminder is a compelling reason for the average, fairly affluent American to vote for Dukakis is an open question.

As it happens, there *is* a clearly compelling reason, but it's a reason Dukakis isn't allowed to talk about honestly: the budget deficit. Dukakis, unlike Bush, shows signs of understanding that the deficit is a problem; that, even if it never triggers a full-fledged economic catastrophe, it soaks up money that would otherwise go toward private-sector investment, and thereby saps the growth of American productivity, which is now pitifully low. Getting the deficit under control would do more to invigorate industry than a half dozen Funds to Rebuild America.

That Dukakis knows this, and Bush apparently doesn't, crystallizes an irony that has quietly insinuated itself in American politics: many conservative Republicans now show no fear of budget deficits, but liberal Democrats have a healthy suspicion of them. That's why Dukakis is willing actually to do something about the deficit—to spend defense dollars more prudently, and raise taxes if necessary. But of course, these days you're not allowed actually to *say* you might raise taxes. And you'd better be careful in talking about even prudent cuts in defense spending, lest your patriotism be questioned. Hence the state of campaign politics in 1988: candidates dress up in funny clothes, say funny things about their opponent, and if there's any airtime left over, they spend it talking about their least consequential ideas.

NOTEBOOK

☐ SCIENTISTS' TIZZY ALARMS EXPERTS:

HOMELESS PLIGHT ANGERS SCIENTISTS

Suspension Effect Astounds Scientists

Rate of Hysterectomies Puzzles Experts

—all from the *New York Times*, September 20

☐ CURSE OF THE L-WORD: We are not among those who shy away from the word "liberal." If anything, we are accused by some of clinging to the label although we don't deserve it. But anyone wondering why the L-word is getting a bad name might study the efforts of liberals in the House of Representatives to kill welfare reform. The welfare reform bill now in House-Senate conference, crafted by Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan and others, has the support of Ronald Reagan, George Bush, and Michael Dukakis. But the liberals, led by Representative Augustus Hawkins, are prepared to kill the reform unless a "workfare" provision is eliminated. This provision would require one parent in two-parent welfare families to spend 16 hours a week in community service or job training. It is essential to Republican support for the bill. It also is a good idea on its own merits. To oppose the idea that someone ought to work (or submit to "training"!) 16 hours a week in exchange for welfare benefits is almost a Reaganite parody of the liberal mentality. In one of his recent bloopers, George Bush said he sees an America "where everybody who has a job wants one." That seems to be Representative Hawkins's idea, too.

☐ NICE WHILE IT LASTED:

Inflation Fears Easing

—*San Francisco Chronicle*, September 7, page C1

Inflation Pressures Build

—same paper, same day, page C4
(thanks to several California readers)

☐ HARMONY TALKS, EVERYBODY WALKS:

Chinese and Soviets End Harmonious Talks on the Future of Cambodia

—*Washington Post*, September 2

Beijing-Moscow Talks on Cambodia Falter

—*New York Times*, same day
(thanks to Raphael Cung, Alexandria, Virginia)

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WHITE HOUSE WATCH

LAST CALL

GARY BAUER, President Reagan's domestic policy adviser, is the New Right remnant at the White House. His conservative allies on the senior staff—Patrick Buchanan, Kenneth Cribb—are long gone, and his best buddy in the administration, Education Secretary William Bennett, left on September 20. Among Bauer's current colleagues at the White House, there is wariness. They criticize him for being too dogmatic and too eager to talk to reporters. Bauer seems unaffected. "You can still get things done," he says. In the waning days of Reagan's presidency, he's gotten a lot done.

More than anyone else, Bauer is responsible for blocking White House support for a federal law banning discrimination against AIDS victims. He's convinced such legislation is both unnecessary and dangerous. AIDS victims suffer very little discrimination, he feels. Expanding federal anti-bias protection to AIDS victims would be a foot in the door toward a national gay rights bill, which he opposes. Or homosexuals would exploit the AIDS law by claiming they were discriminated against because people thought they had AIDS, Bauer says. "In practice, you could wind up with a gay rights statute." In any case, the White House role in enacting a federal ban on AIDS discrimination is pivotal. Congress has refused to pass such a ban, but Republican opposition might dissolve if Reagan called for one. Chiefly because of Bauer, he didn't.

Here's how it happened, or didn't happen. Bauer got bad news one morning in late July as he was leaving the White House on a family vacation. James Watkins, the chairman of the president's commission on AIDS, had already gone on record in favor of protecting AIDS victims under federal anti-discrimination laws. Now, Dr. D. Ian MacDonald, the White House official who'd been asked to study the commission's report, was going to do the same. The afternoon before, at a meeting of White House aides including MacDonald, the consensus had been the other way, Bauer's way. Bauer had argued his side strenuously. But MacDonald had changed his mind, Bauer was told. A call to MacDonald confirmed it.

Bauer was furious, particularly because he had no time to act. His view was that MacDonald's recommendation was critical. MacDonald is normally the president's adviser on drug policy, but he'd been asked to review the AIDS commission's report so that Bauer, whose views were well known and controversial, wouldn't get the job. If MacDonald joined Watkins in urging an anti-bias law, the president would be put in a box, Bauer figured. It would be awkward for him to buck both Watkins and his own adviser. Reagan, who doesn't have strong feelings on the issue, might just go along.

On his way to the airport in a government car, Bauer grabbed the telephone and called a White House aide. He said he'd resign if the president was forced into backing a federal anti-bias law. And he'd go public and explain exactly why he was resigning. Then he proceeded to the airport, and to his vacation in the Kentucky woods. Bauer didn't hear a word from the White House. But a few days later he watched MacDonald's press conference at the White House on CNN. He was delighted. A new law may never be needed, MacDonald said. "States and communities are coming up with laws or already have taken care of this problem," he said. "And that should cover people in the workplace." A few days later Bauer returned to work. Ken Duberstein, the White House chief of staff, said later he never knew of Bauer's threat to resign. "I have full confidence in Gary. He is a valued member of the team."

Marlin Fitzwater, the White House spokesman, describes Bauer as "aggressive, the conscience of the conservatives." Presidential aides with credentials like that—Buchanan, Ed Meese, James Watt—eventually run into trouble with Nancy Reagan. Bauer did and, as usual, she prevailed. When the AIDS commission was being established in 1987, Bauer was adamant about keeping a homosexual off the panel. Mrs. Reagan overrode that with a single call to a senior White House official. She said her brother, a Philadelphia doctor, could offer a name. He did, but that person was unacceptable. He came up with another, and that one was put on the commission. Bauer was thwarted.

BAUER'S FORTE is making the most out of what appear to be insignificant assignments. In January 1987, for instance, the president's "legislative and administrative message to Congress," which is mostly boilerplate, said the administration would pursue "pro-family guidelines" in its "family report." Nine months later Reagan issued a "family executive order" that called on Bauer to come up with specific policies to implement the guidelines. Bauer was more than happy to comply, all the more so because the assignment was his alone. He was not obligated to get approval from anyone before submitting his proposals to Reagan.

By early last summer Bauer had his recommendations ready. He had scoured the conservative agenda and come up with a variety of leftovers. He circulated his ideas to others on the White House staff. "There should be an effort to reach a collegial understanding," Bauer said. He accepted dozens of suggested changes. But when the suggestions kept coming and stylistic changes in his draft were proposed, he stiffened. His recommendations were getting nibbled to death and delayed. He told Rhett Dawson, the White House staff secretary, that the proposals had to be dispatched to Reagan. They were.

Reagan bought all of them. "Once you get something like this on his desk, he inevitably does the right thing—in both meanings of the word," said Bauer. What Reagan signed was a series of memos to members of his Cabinet. The secretary of agriculture was ordered to test the use of housing vouchers for the poor in rural areas. The attorney general was instructed to draft legislation "requir-

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ing that no bill be reported to the Senate or House of Representatives by any committee of either House unless such bill is accompanied by a Family Impact Statement." The secretary of education was told to "develop a model policy that agencies could use to make the receipt of federal funds contingent upon institutions taking appropriate steps to create a drug-free environment." The new education secretary, Lauro Cavazos, leaves no doubt about his pro-family position, by the way. He has ten kids.

THOSE MEMOS drew little reaction. But the one to Otis Bowen, the secretary of health and human services, got a lot. He was told to make sure that government educational programs promote sexual abstinence among teens, and to bar the use of federal funds for distributing contraceptives in schools "without parental permission." The touchiest order dealt with fetal research, a new area of concern for the anti-abortion movement. Bauer believes that use of fetal tissue or organs from aborted babies is morally wrong. If it's allowed, companies will soon be marketing fetal tissue, Bauer says, and a woman may get pregnant in order to have an abortion and then supply the fetal tissue for research.

The memo, drafted by Bauer and signed by Reagan, said Bowen must "develop options such as an executive order . . . to protect unborn or newborn children from experimentation, research, and organ transplantation, except in cases where the unborn or newborn child would itself directly benefit by any such procedures to which it was subjected." That doesn't require a total ban on the use of fetal tissue, but it comes close. Bowen didn't raise any objections when the issue was raised in White House meetings last spring and summer, but his agency is none too keen on a ban. "HHS has not always shared our views on this," said Fitzwater.

To make matters worse, Bauer jumped the gun. Six days before the presidential memo went to Bowen, Bauer sent a draft executive order to him. It was marked "eyes only" and "confidential," but it quickly got around HHS and was leaked to the press. Bowen never answered Bauer's letter, but he complained to reporters that he didn't know if White House instructions on the issue were coming from Reagan or Bauer. This prompted Nancy Risque, the Cabinet secretary, to call Bowen and assure him Reagan wants to limit the use of fetal tissue.

Bowen is torn. "There are some good pros and some good cons" about using aborted fetal tissue for experimental treatment for Parkinson's and other diseases, he said at a breakfast with health reporters. An aide says Bowen will give the White House a progress report in December when an advisory committee of scientists gives him its findings on the issue. Before that, he shouldn't act.

Bauer thinks HHS is stalling. He doesn't intend to wait. He is relentless. If one approach fails—and sending the draft executive order to Bowen clearly did—Bauer tries another. He plans to meet with the White House general counsel's office, the budget office, and someone from HHS, and to work up an order for Reagan to sign that limits the use of fetal tissue. "We'll start putting words on paper," said Bauer, "and see if anyone says stop." Chances are, they won't.

FRED BARNES

CAMPAIGN '88

THE ZAP GAP

MICHAEL DUKAKIS has stopped looking like the little man atop the wedding cake. Now he doffs his suit jacket, rolls up his sleeves, and tries to belt back at George Bush. He's got a new speech that attacks the "two-job prosperity" and the "latchkey prosperity" of the Reagan era and promises "we can do better than that." But there's still a zap gap. On a two-day trip to California, the best line Dukakis could muster against Bush was this: "You know, the sight of George Bush campaigning on the coasts and talking about his commitment to clean water reminds me of the old saying from television detective shows: 'They always return to the scene of the crime.' " His new stump speech contains a stronger shot: "We can't afford leadership that says over and over again that it's morning in America, and then suggests that all we Americans have to do is roll over and go back to sleep." But as Dukakis's new theme goes, he's still got to do better than that.

Dukakis has made progress in the last few weeks in other areas besides rhetoric. He has rebounded from six or eight points behind in national polls to nearly even, though he is probably still behind in enough key states to be trailing in electoral votes. Dukakis's campaign belatedly is enlisting the help of former Democratic opponents, their top staff, and members of Congress. Dukakis's prodigal campaign chief, John Sasso, seems to have gotten Jesse Jackson on board and team-playing. The new stump speech is the work of two gifted Kennedy family speechwriters, Theodore Sorensen and Robert Shrum, and seeks to combine JFK uplift with neo-populist themes previously sounded by Ted Kennedy and Richard Gephardt.

Most important, the Democrats are assembling a so-called "soft money" war chest of more than $40 million—about as much as the Republicans—to spend on voter identification and get-out-the-vote activities at the state level, and will have a field organization of paid workers and volunteers that is bigger than the Republicans' to ring doorbells and deliver voters to the polls. "This year we won't start out two points down on account of money and organization," says former Democratic Party executive director Mark Siegel. "But for those things to produce a victory, the campaign has got to do all the other things to make this a close race."

And that, disappointing as it may be to substance-

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minded purists, includes bringing Dukakis up to speed with one-liners. Dukakis tries to say harsh things about Bush, so it doesn't seem he's squeamish. At a Los Angeles high school, he said that while parents and kids were fighting drugs, "Mr. Bush and his friends were doing business with a Panamanian dictator." A few days earlier in Ohio, Dukakis said that Bush was "disastrously and completely and unforgivably wrong" in giving advice to the president on Iran. If Dukakis could scorch Bush with derision, one guesses he would.

But he doesn't. Even in the new speech, Dukakis doesn't so much deliver red meat to his audiences as baked scrod. Bush, says Dukakis, "sees a complacent America, an America that wants to look backward even as a new century is about to dawn." He says, "We don't need a warmed-over call to selfishness; we need a new call to greatness." We need a new president, Dukakis says, "who will stand up for those who have no special-interest lobbyists in Washington and no special influence at the bank." It's still pretty trite stuff.

Obviously, no presidential campaign should be decided on the basis of who's got the best zingers, but they do lend vividness to a candidate. They charge up his supporters with righteous indignation, the next best fuel to genuine inspiration in a political campaign. They provide the television networks with sound bites—sorry to say, the key unit of modern political communication.

And they work for Bush. After Dukakis mounted a tank to show support for conventional defense, Bush said, "You cannot fool a Soviet leadership by knocking America's defense for ten years and then riding around in a tank for ten minutes." In California Bush said, "I understand why [Dukakis] has this pessimistic problem. He can't get elected unless things get worse, and things can't get worse unless he gets elected." And even Dan Quayle has come up with an intentional bon mot now and again, as in: "[Dukakis's] farm policy is the Belgian endive and his defense policy is the Belgian waffle."

Part of Dukakis's problem is that one-of-the-boys banter does not come naturally to him. He revealed to reporters aboard his campaign plane that he does not remember whether or not he met Cher at his big Hollywood fundraiser. His favorite topic of small talk is the tragic loss of historic buildings in Boston. The book next to his bed back home in Brookline is a history of Irish settlement in Lowell. He did not know, until someone told him, the subject matter of Tom Wolfe's best-selling novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. It would be out of character, and silly, for Dukakis to repeat any gag a writer might compose for him, but it's no crime to enlist them, any more than it is to have a good pollster or ad man.

Personally, I thought that when Bush uttered his memorable gaffe, "I stand for anti-bigotry, anti-Semitism, and anti-racism. That is what drives me," Dukakis or one of his aides should have cracked, "Well, anyone can make a Freudian slip." OK, maybe that goes over the line. But Dukakis & Company have every right to find a functional equivalent to the Pledge of Allegiance veto—a single item in Bush's record that can be mercilessly exploited to place the vice president on the defensive. It's another sad fact about presidential politics: rope-a-dope punching pays.

WHAT COULD Dukakis use? Well, there's Bush's advocacy of a reduction in the capital gains tax, a $40 billion per year new gift from one country clubber to his friends, with two-thirds of the break going to people making over $200,000 a year. Or in a pinch, the March 1985 tie-breaking vote that Bush cast to cut cost-of-living increases for Social Security recipients. If patriotism is the last refuge of scoundrels, then Social Security is the same for Democrats.

Clearly, the Dukakis campaign does intend to exploit Bush's selection of Dan Quayle as his running mate. Democratic activists are tumbling over themselves with ideas for ads raising the specter of "President Quayle." Dukakis so far has been deriding Quayle by referring to his aristocratic-sounding full name, J. Danforth Quayle, apparently to elicit class animosity among Reagan Democrats. That doesn't work, but something will. Calling him "Danny Quayle" might skewer him more effectively.

Beyond one-liners, Dukakis aides claim that they have a more lofty method in mind for putting Bush on the defensive: relentlessly talking about issues, the respective records of the candidates, and their leadership qualifications until the press and the voters rise up and demand that Bush quit his allegedly substanceless negative campaigning and start playing on Dukakis's turf: how to solve the country's problems.

To this end, Dukakis has given a series of speeches on education (in which he proposed a self-financing college loan program), foreign policy and defense (setting forth a strategy of challenging the Soviet Union to live up to its reformist promises and announcing which weapons systems Dukakis favors), the environment (proposing to make the EPA a Cabinet department), drugs (promising to double the number of DEA agents and federal prosecutors), and health care (proposing a national employee-insurance requirement like the one in Massachusetts). Campaign aide Francis O'Brien said these speeches were necessary because, even after months of primary election campaigning, it became obvious that voters did not know who Michael Dukakis was and what he stood for, making him vulnerable to attacks by Bush. "Bush still has to tell the public who he is," O'Brien said. "He can't keep talking only about us."

Maybe so. But until recently, Bush has had a fairly clear raison d'être for his campaign, and Dukakis has lacked one. Even if only partly articulated, Bush's simple message to the country has been: "Things are pretty good. We'll try to make them better, but first let's not mess them up by voting in a liberal." Dukakis has lacked a simple message—not just one that could be put on a bumper sticker, but more important, one that a neighbor could use to tell a neighbor why he was voting for Dukakis.

Two themes have been working their way through the Dukakis campaign thought processes, sometimes warring with one another. Finally they have been combined in the

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THE SOLUTION TO THE MIDDLE EAST CONFLICT?

A PALESTINIAN STATE IN THE WEST BANK AND GAZA AT PEACE WITH ISRAEL

Consider the views of Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Yehoshafat Harkabi, former Director of Israeli Military Intelligence and an acknowledged authority on the PLO. Says Harkabi:

- **We [Israelis] cannot take for granted the long-term existence of a Jewish state in which half the population is Arab . . .**
- **The central norm of the international system and international law is self-determination.**
- **Reality will force Israel to retreat from her political stance, to withdraw from the territories and to negotiate with the PLO . . .**
- **We [Israelis] will have to negotiate with the Palestinians, the majority of whom, in any referendum, would vote for the PLO as their representatives . . .**
- **The wish for a local Palestinian representation detached from the PLO and more moderate than that body is merely delusion . . .**
- **A separate agreement with Jordan is no longer possible . . .**

YEHOSHAFAT HARKABI
"A Policy for the Moment of Truth"

- **King Hussein's recent move to extricate Jordan from the West Bank is no ploy. It is a strategic step that may prove to be a turning point in the history of Middle Eastern politics. With Jordan removed as a putative spokesman for the Palestinians, Israel must face reality and sooner or later deal directly with the Palestine Liberation Organization. Hussein's move proves that Israel can no longer afford to tarry.**

YEHOSHAFAT HARKABI
"Hussein's West Bank Shock Strategy"
The Washington Post, August 7, 1988

General Harkabi's views find support in American public opinion. A recent *Gallup* survey of Americans who are aware of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict showed that more favor an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza than are opposed (41% to 23%) and an even greater number favor the U.S. dealing directly with the PLO than are opposed (58% to 27%).

A *Chicago Tribune* poll reflects that 38% of Americans favor creating a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza with 23% opposed and a *Los Angeles Times* poll reflects that 52% of Americans believe the U.S. should negotiate with the PLO while 34% are opposed.

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For a copy of "A Policy for the Moment of Truth," write the Foundation, a non-profit corporation which seeks to assist in the peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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new stump speech. One is, "beneath the surface, things really aren't so good," which has the disadvantage of sounding Mondalian—negative and gloomy, capable of being caricatured by Republicans as "middle-class malaise." The other, though, is, "we can do better" and "let's make America No. 1 again," which appeals to the competitive and hopeful instincts of the American people—those that Ronald Reagan exploited in 1980.

Dukakis does seem to be right about the economics of his case. The average pay of the American worker has been stagnant since the early 1970s, and families have rising average incomes only because wives are working. Meanwhile the costs of things that fulfill the American dream—college tuitions, health care, down payments on a home—have been rising out of reach. And the United States has not been saving and investing enough during the Reagan years—in spite of cuts in marginal tax rates—to enable this country to produce and compete its way out of debt.

Two things have yet to be proved: whether this message resonates politically with the mood of a majority of Americans, and whether Dukakis can convince people that his program of private-public partnership and investment will produce a rising standard of living, rather than merely more government spending. Early polls indicated that a sizable proportion of Americans shared the "anxieties and uncertainty" that Dukakis refers to. A year ago, for example, 65 percent of the public wanted different policies from those of the Reagan administration, according to a study by pollster David Yankelovich, and only 25 percent wanted continuation of them. Now, the balance for change is only 51 percent to 42 percent. And the latest ABC-*Washington Post* poll shows that people think Bush would be better for their financial future than Dukakis, by a margin of 50 percent to 38 percent.

If there is genuine worry about the future among the American middle class, Dukakis's new speech ought to evoke it. It is earnest and substantive, in keeping with the candidate's personality. But it still lacks lilt and the kind of fire that will raise boils on the backside of his opponent. It would be reassuring for a candidate to win the election without winning the sound bite war; it would be worse to lose the election.

MORTON M. KONDRACKE

Sting gets serious.

VOX POP

Philadelphia

Like most of the others at the big Amnesty International rock concert here on September 19, I went for the music, not the politics. The concert, the first American stop on a worldwide tour, drew around 75,000 people (admission: $35). A rally the afternoon before, on Independence Mall, drew around 375 (admission: free). A cynic might conclude from this that the appeal of politics is one-half of one percent of the appeal of rock music. Nevertheless, this was a political event—possibly more important and certainly more edifying than anything that happened in the presidential campaign last week.

POLITICS MAY NOT have motivated the fans, but politics clearly motivated the stars who drew the fans and who tried to supply a rudimentary political message. Politics was what brought Bruce Springsteen together with the Britishers Sting and Peter Gabriel, the young Boston folksinger Tracy Chapman, and the Senegalese pop star Youssou N'Dour.

What makes this tour especially interesting is its Third World orientation. Human rights is a safe, unexceptionable topic in the United States and Western Europe, but not in the neighborhoods of many of the other places on the rockers' itinerary. Bringing the message to those places is the real purpose of the tour. The high ticket prices here and in Europe and Japan subsidize the immense logistical costs and low ticket prices (a dollar or two) in Africa, India, and Latin America. The "hook" is the 40th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly at a time when that body was still dominated by certifiably democratic states.

The politics of this tour are considerably more sophisticated than the politics of the sorts of rock-for-a-cause benefits I used to attend 15 and 20 years ago. Those tended to fall into two categories: the counterculturally marginal, such as the 1971 Free John Sinclair concert in Ann Arbor, Michigan, with John Lennon and Stevie Wonder, protesting the imprisonment of a "White Panther" leader for marijuana possession; and the unexceptionably humanitarian, such as the 1971 Concert for Bangladesh in New York City, with George Harrison and Bob Dylan, raising funds for famine relief. The first category has pretty much vanished. The second category flourishes, but the Amnesty tour is not really in it.

"We live in an era in which rock stars are asked to lend their names to a great many causes," said Sting at the well-attended press conference a few hours before the concert. "Many of these causes are vague or woolly, along the lines of 'Let's all join hands and make the world a better place.' Amnesty is different." Sting then described the case of Sita Ram Maskey, an imprisoned 36-year-old Nepalese teacher of deaf children. "There is no heat and no hot water in the jail. He is kept packed together with other prisoners, some of them very violent, crowded 25 to a cell. All his letters are censored. . . . His crime—and I want you to listen very carefully to this—is that he organized a protest against the sale of contaminated Polish milk powder manufactured during the Chernobyl disaster. Amnesty is trying to do something about his case. Amnesty is effective because its focus is on real people with names, addresses, and children. I believe it is one of

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the most *civilized* organizations in the history of the world.

As Tom Wolfe and a decade of "Saturday Night Live" sketches have taught us, entertainment figures who talk about "issues" or "causes" often reveal themselves as naive, pompous, hypocritical, or foolish. I did not detect much of that in the remarks made by the rock stars at the press conference. But judge for yourself.

Peter Gabriel said, "We've all read articles about the phenomenon of people becoming 'aided-out,' overloaded by worthy causes. It is easy for young people to feel cynical. Amnesty offers them a kind of activity in which simple individual action can make a difference. It tells them that by taking a few minutes and writing a letter you can be the person who pulls someone out of torture and prison half a world away."

Bruce Springsteen said, "When I was a kid I got a sense of many things from rock music. I got a sense of good times, of what living could be about, a sense of sex, a sense of human possibility. Most of all I got a sense of freedom. . . . When you grow up, the problem is finding a way of holding on to your idealism after you lose your innocence. I think Amnesty International is an organization that allows you to do that. It has a very powerful but limited agenda, based on specific, pragmatic actions that anyone can take. It's not about changing the world overnight, but about having an opportunity to make the world a little less lonely, less hateful, less oppressive."

Springsteen made a similar little speech at the concert. There were other very short speeches. During the break before Springsteen's set, two huge screens showed a video in which the Universal Declaration was read aloud (by the voices of Debra Winger and Jeff Bridges) and illustrated by 30 animation artists, one for each article. Less directly, the message was conveyed by the artists' choice of songs—Springsteen's "War," Gabriel's "Biko," Chapman's "Talking 'bout Revolution," the spiritual "Oh, Freedom," sung by Joan Baez, and the two final songs, for which the entire ensemble came back out on stage, Bob Dylan's "Chimes of Freedom" and "Get Up, Stand Up," by the late reggae composer and musician Bob Marley: *Get up, stand up / Stand up for your rights / Get up, stand up / Don't give up the fight . . .* It's hard to know whether the message thus conveyed was received, though the organizers estimated that by the evening's end some 60,000 of the 75,000 concertgoers had signed petitions asking the world's governments to respect the provisions of the Universal Declaration.

HUMAN RIGHTS hasn't been much of an issue in the election campaign, unless you count the right to be forced to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. One thing the Amnesty tour shows, I suppose, is that—the presidential race (especially Bush's part of it) notwithstanding—it is still possible to stage a political event that maintains an elevated moral tone, though maybe it takes a bunch of wildly dressed, earringed, longhaired rockers to do it.

HENDRIK HERTZBERG

THE MONEY CULTURE

EVERYTHING MUST GO

HERE'S THE DEAL: You put up $10 million in cash. A federal agency will put up another $200 million. In return you get to own 70 percent of a billion-dollar savings and loan association. Like the deal so far? It gets better: If interest rates rise and it costs you more to pull in deposits, the feds will pick the tab. If rates fall, you get to keep the extra profits. Ditto for assets: If loans go bad, the feds will handle it; if they turn out to be in better shape than you thought, you get the extra money.

The Federal Savings and Loan Insurance Corporation, the insolvent federal agency whose job it is to bail out or shut down the hundreds of likewise insolvent S&Ls in this country, has been peddling this deal—and some even better—around the country and finding quite a few takers, including former Treasury Secretary William Simon and Robert M. Bass, the mild-mannered Fort Worth billionaire. As billionaires go, Bass is a piker; he's only got $1.2 billion, which means he ranks a measly 27th among the richest Americans.

But with 505 thrifts insolvent and another 435 with a dangerously low net worth (out of 3,000 in the country), FSLIC (pronounced "fizz-lick") needs to find a lot of buyers. The agency recently held a conference in San Francisco to advertise its wares, even publishing a fancy sales brochure. In their haste to unload, FSLIC and the Federal Home Loan Bank Board, which regulates S&Ls, are making quick and dirty deals—deals that either will go sour, leaving the taxpayer to clean up the ultimate mess, or will end up making their new owners millions or billions.

FSLIC is tossing around money and huge institutions in a way that's unprecedented in financial history. Over the past four months, under something called the Southwest Plan, the agency has sold 49 S&Ls in seven transactions at a cost of $121 million to the buyers and $21.8 billion to FSLIC.

The reason that FSLIC is in such a hurry is that hundreds of S&Ls are, by any normal method of accounting, broke. Their liabilities overwhelm their assets. But since those liabilities are cash—other people's money—the till is not empty. Yet. The day of reckoning, however, is at hand, and the agency is trying to postpone this disaster by handing off the hot potatoes to "buyers" who may be able to hang on to them long enough for a miracle (such as a plummeting of interest rates) to occur. Or, at least, long enough so that Congress will appropriate the money to make FSLIC whole again—an event that most people who follow banking expect to occur immediately after the new administration, whichever it is, takes office. Right now, with an election coming up, neither Congress nor the White House has much interest in facing up to the bill for the horrible S&L mess. No one really knows how high it will be, but guesses run from $25 billion to $70 billion.

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What everyone had thought FSLIC was supposed to do when S&Ls (or "thrifts," as they're also called) got into trouble was shut them down and pay off depositors of $100,000 or less. The problem, however, is that FSLIC doesn't have the money to pay off these depositors. So it has come up with a different solution: it sells the sick thrift to a healthy thrift—or, more recently, it sells the sick thrift to anyone who'll buy it. Since smart buyers know that FSLIC is getting more and more desperate, recent "sales" aren't sales at all. They're giveaways, with the buyer barely at risk. But to keep going even under new ownership, the thrifts need money to run on. Since the buyers are clever enough not to want to put their own money into a sick thrift, FSLIC has had to come up with the money. But since FSLIC doesn't have any money, it instead has been putting up what are loosely termed "notes," which are supposed to be treated as hard assets even though Congress has not said that it will stand behind them. FSLIC, in other words, is using its own printing press to crank out dollars (more than $12 billion worth so far—in addition to nearly that same amount promised for the future in what are called "assistance agreements") to prop up thrifts that it then turns over, virtually for free, to private investors. Those investors can then use the thrift's deposits for the sorts of things that got the thrifts into trouble in the first place.

FSLIC does seem to be doing business with a more respectable class of customer than the characters who have owned thrifts and bled them dry in the past. But that doesn't make the deals any less risky for the taxpayer or less beneficial for the buyer. Consider, for example, PHM Corporation, a Michigan company whose main business is building houses (Pulte Homes). PHM invested $45 million to buy five Texas thrifts, and FSLIC contributed $600 million in notes to pull the thrifts up from insolvency. PHM got something else: the Federal Home Loan Bank Board is allowing it to borrow from its own thrifts, which have deposits of $1.6 billion, to build more houses. This kind of self-dealing is usually forbidden, but the Bank Board is in a hurry to unload thrifts in Texas, where most of its problems are, and while $45 million may not sound like much money to buy $1.6 billion in deposits, it's still more cash than FSLIC usually sees.

Or take the case of Caroline Hunt of the Texas Hunt family, whose own unflourishing institution, Southwest Savings, acquired four thrifts (assets: $4 billion) in May. Southwest Savings put up no real cash, just signed a note for $25 million. FSLIC's obligation, according to the General Accounting Office, is $3.5 billion.

"They have not really been able to attract private capital in any sizable form," L. William Seidman, chairman of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, the not-yet-insolvent agency that insures deposits in commercial banks as opposed to thrifts, said recently and snidely of his colleagues at FSLIC. "I don't want to be critical of them, but this is not really a solution." But the FDIC has been doing almost the same thing. The research department of Morgan Stanley, the investment house, sent out a "purchase recommendation" last month that must have had clients practically drooling over the prospect of buying stock in NCNB, the North Carolina bank holding company that picked up the subsidiaries of the old First Republic Bank of Texas for a song, courtesy of the FDIC. Here are a few chapter headings from the Morgan Stanley report: "A No-Money-Down Deal," "Anti-Dilutive from the Start," "Shareholder Value Enhanced Enormously," etc., etc. The deal, said Morgan, "gives [NCNB] a low-cost—indeed, a potentially free—warrant on a turnaround in the Texas economy." Morgan estimates that "this transaction enhances the value of NCNB stock upward of $8 a share"—or almost a third.

Still, even though 184 banks failed last year (the most since the Depression) and even though that record is expected to be broken this year, thrifts are in generally worse shape than commercial banks, and the deals that FSLIC is cutting are more generous than the FDIC's.

FSLIC's neatest deal was announced on Labor Day: Robert Bass would put up $550 million to buy 70 percent of American Savings and Loan Association of Stockton, California, the country's largest thrift with $30 billion in assets. FSLIC would put up the equivalent of $2 billion (in notes and obligations) for the remaining 30 percent. Now, Bass's investment seems like a lot of money compared with, say, the deal by which Merabank of Phoenix acquired a couple of Texas thrifts (assets: $1 billion) for $29 million of its own cash versus $1.2 billion from FSLIC. But Bass got one especially nice arrangement: he can use $1.5 billion of the thrift's deposits (federally insured, of course) for what are euphemistically called "merchant banking" purposes. In other words, for a $550 million investment, he gets $1.5 billion, with the blessing and backing of the feds, for doing deals. That's leverage. What sort of deals will Bass do? This year he's already bought the Westin hotel chain ($1.5 billion itself) and then sold off the Plaza to Donald Trump for $410 million. He's bought Bell & Howell ($702 million), and he's been trying to buy Macmillan ($2 billion).

IN THE good old days—until about ten years ago—the savings and loan business didn't hold much attraction for the Robert Basses of the world. Most S&Ls were set up as happy little cooperative institutions, like Jimmy Stewart's in *It's a Wonderful Life*. Families would pool their savings in a mutual association, and the money would be loaned to other families so that they could buy their own houses. The math was easy: S&Ls paid interest up to a federally mandated ceiling. The borrower paid a little more, and the difference between the two rates went to overhead. It was hard for an S&L to get into trouble. All a banker had to do was, literally, follow a rule book, making sure that the monthly mortgage payments amounted to a certain percentage of the borrower's income.

S&Ls were never managed by brilliant financiers because they didn't have to be. The mutual form of ownership, by which the depositors "owned" the association and there was no capital stock, discouraged speculation. There were shenanigans, however: many S&L boards were dominated by lawyers, who made a good living off fees for

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closings and title searches, or by developers, who made sure that families who bought houses in their subdivisions got easy financing. But in the old days, it was hard to cheat, hard to run an S&L into the ground—mainly because thrifts were so limited in what they could do with their money. That changed.

The first big problem was interest rates. S&Ls borrowed short and lent long. They took in short-term deposits in the form of passbook accounts or certificates that matured in a few months or a few years. Then they loaned out these funds as 20- or 30-year mortgages with fixed interest rates. The trick to running a stable bank is to "match" the maturities of liabilities (deposits) and assets (loans). Thrifts didn't do that, but, with interest rates relatively stable for 40 years or so, the mismatch never mattered.

But when interest rates shot up after the oil embargo and again in the late 1970s and early 1980s, thrifts found themselves with mortgage loans on their books yielding 6 or 7 percent for another 10 or 20 years that they had to finance in a volatile short-term market where lenders were demanding rates of 12, 13, or 15 percent. And worse: the thrifts' core deposits, those passbook accounts, were flowing out the door, looking for higher rates from new inventions like money-market funds.

The solution that Congress found for this crisis was deregulation. Thrifts were liberated completely in 1986, allowed to pay higher interest rates for deposits and to invest the money outside the home mortgage market. While this sounded like a decent way out, it proved a disaster. First, because many thrift managers were out of their depths in the larger financial world. Second, because the liberation of the thrifts attracted some of the most venal lowlifes in America to the business (some of whom are now behind bars). Third, because the regulatory agencies weren't equipped to police the chicaneries of the new thrift managers. And fourth, because federal insurance enabled the bad thrifts to drive out the good.

FSLIC insures all federal thrifts, both the well-run and the reckless. The reckless, like American Savings, played dialing for dollars, with phone banks that solicited deposits all over the country with the lure of high interest rates. And since the government guarantees that a $100,000 account in a reckless S&L is just as safe as a $100,000 account in a safe S&L, the reckless thrifts attracted deposits, which they then put to work as high-risk loans, usually in real estate. In the case of American, a subsidiary of Charles Knapp's notorious (and now justifiably bankrupt) Financial Corporation of America, loans went to hotshot developers willing to pay 6 or 7 percent above prime, as high as 24 percent interest. Then as the loans went bad, the reckless thrifts were pressured to pull in more and more deposits to stay liquid so they could "grow" their way out of their problems.

Next the price of oil collapsed and the economies of Texas, Oklahoma, and Colorado soured, and the effects rippled through California, the South, and the Midwest. Suddenly, the thrifts had a new crisis on their hands. This one had nothing to do with interest rates. It had to do with what bankers call "asset quality." The thrifts were stuck with lousy loans, on see-through office buildings in Houston and half-built hotels in Denver. But just as the thrifts tried to grow their way out of the interest-rate problem, they figured they could ignore their bad loans, stay liquid, and get through their asset problems. Federal regulators are often tempted to become accomplices in this kind of tactic for a simple reason: to write off the assets means to lower the net worth of the thrift, often to eliminate the net worth altogether. Insolvent thrifts have to be shut down, but the federal insurance agencies didn't have the cash to do the shutting.

Now the Home Loan Bank Board and FSLIC have come up with a way of keeping insolvent thrifts alive, maybe even through the start of the 101st Congress in January. And (who knows?) by then Robert Bass may be up to 20th or even 15th on the billionaires' ladder.

JAMES K. GLASSMAN

The decline of debate.

PULL IT ACROSS YOUR FLOW

MENTION HIGH SCHOOL debate to most Americans and the image evoked is a pleasing one: fresh-faced youths out of a Norman Rockwell scene expostulating in breaking voices about the meaning of democracy and pleading with the audience to reject the contentions of "our worthy opponents." Inform them further that thousands of high school students take part in interscholastic debating, and that top debaters are courted by elite colleges and law schools, and you've spawned the hopeful impression that here is an oasis of liberal learning in the intellectual desert charted by Allan Bloom and William Bennett.

It is, alas, a debatable proposition. If the meaningless sound bites traded at today's presidential debates represent one regrettable oratorical extreme, then the current condition of high school debates represents the other. Let me take you to a typical high school debate tournament, at which two-member teams from around the country square off on the "public policy" proposition that they will wrestle with all year. High school debate topics are worthy and boring enough to come from the MacNeil-Lehrer playbook; this year's question is whether the federal government should maintain a program of retirement security for the elderly.

The debate is already in progress, so you let yourself in quietly, fearful of interrupting one of the speeches. But no one is speaking. Instead, the two pairs of debaters, hedged in by prodigious file drawers and briefcases, sit at desks scratching on legal pads as the "audience"—a single

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judge—inclines scribelike over her own notepad.

Time passes until one of the debaters at last rises from his desk, legal pad and sheaf of index cards balanced on his arm. You brace yourself for a burst of eloquence—certainly the boy has had plenty of time to prepare—but when he speaks it is sotto voce with eyes cast downward. "I'll start with the D.A.s," he says, "then go back to the P.M.N. and finish with solvency." A pause follows, during which the other debaters and the judge nod knowingly and consult their legal pads. Then, suddenly, our speaker shifts into drill-instructor mode and shouts: "REALIZE that the Affirmative has dropped all of our D.A.s, therefore they lose. Now go to the B(1) subpoint." That's the last sentence you can make out; as he presses on, the boy increases his speed until he sounds like the motormouth in the Federal Express commercials. Adding to the robotic effect is his habit of constantly raising and lowering his right arm in order to scoop up his index cards.

I EXAGGERATE—but only a little. Some debaters manage to make themselves understood despite the machine-gun delivery. And such is the effervescence of youth that even the most jargon-clogged debate can suddenly turn frisky and familiar, as when one of the debaters I recently heard warned that if a certain policy were implemented, "the Soviet Union will freak out of their minds!"

Overall, however, the effect of a high school debate on the unwary spectator is usually one of bewilderment. Today's budding Buckleys traffic more in bizarre jargon than the telling bon mot. A "D.A.," for example, refers to "disadvantage," a term of art for a negative consequence of the adoption of the Affirmative resolution. "P.M.N." stands for Plan Meets Need. "Solvency" is a reference not to financial security but to the ability of the Affirmative plan to "solve" a problem. But don't expect a contestant to translate these terms for you. In today's high school debates, the object of the exercise is to beat your opponent, not win over an audience.

IT WASN'T always thus. In the mid-1960s, when I was a fledgling debater for a Catholic boys' school, debate was still an exercise in communication. True, in most of our contests we debated before a single judge rather than an audience, and, like the current generation, we made our points with intricate arguments (or so we thought) buttressed with evidence from experts; then as now, debaters were recognizable by their file boxes bulging with "quote cards." We also observed various conventions that formal debate borrowed from law and the social sciences. If we were arguing for the Affirmative side, for example, we knew we had to make a "prima facie" case for adopting the change spelled out in the debate resolution.

But the conventions weren't allowed to overwhelm the fluency and intelligibility of our speeches; they were, rhetorically speaking, the skull beneath the skin. When we began a speech, we said, "Good morning" as if we were talking to real people; we referred to "disadvantages," not "D.A.s"; and we looked at the audience, even if it was an audience of one.

What has happened in the ensuing 20 years? Like a good debater, I offer the testimony of an expert. John E. Kennedy began his debate career humbly, as my partner at Pittsburgh's Central Catholic High School, before soaring to heights I never achieved as a high school and college debater and as the debate coach for our old high school. Kennedy, who now teaches public speaking at the University of Pittsburgh, sees the transformation of debate as a case study of what happens when form comes to dominate content. "After observing what happened in debate," Kennedy says, "you can understand how things like the baroque and rococo movements in art occurred, or the growth of bureaucracy in organizations."

THE KEY TO the metamorphosis was the "flow pad." Even in my day, high school debaters tracked the "flow" of arguments on legal pads or, more flamboyantly, on artists' sketch pads. Still, the emphasis was on oral persuasion and a good memory. But beginning in the early 1970s, Kennedy recalls, "what you could get on paper became the important element in the contest."

A seminal figure in this transformation, Kennedy recalls, was Laurence Tribe. TNR readers know Tribe as a media-savvy constitutional scholar at Harvard Law School and nemesis of Robert Bork. Kennedy remembers him as Larry Tribe, the champion debater for Harvard who played mentor to Kennedy and other star high school debaters at a summer debate workshop at Georgetown University. "What happened with Larry Tribe," Kennedy recalls, "is that by being able to wed his analysis to notes that would allow him to keep track of oral argumentation and copious amounts of evidence and research, he was able to convey much more information in a more precise manner." The logical extension of Tribe's approach, Kennedy says, was a tactic known as "the spread"—as in spreading your opponent thin by loading your speech with so many arguments (all duly noted on the judge's "flow pad") that he can never adequately refute them all. Debate speeches were on their way to becoming the oral equivalent of lawyers' briefs, complete with "cites" and insiders' jargon.

Now the power of the flow pad is what moves most high school debates. When a debater claims to refute one of his opponents' arguments, he exhorts the judge to "pull that across your flow." Kennedy remembers one memorable debate in which a speaker cited a potential war as one of the D.A.s—disadvantages, remember?—of a particular Affirmative proposal. "So pull those dead bodies across your flow," the debater urged.

The bizarre debate round described above should now make sense. A long interval between speeches—"prep time"—isn't a problem because the real debate takes place on the notepad, not at the podium. And once a debater finally struggles to his feet, there is no time to waste on pleasantries like "Good morning"; a more useful introduction is a preview of where the speaker plans to go with the flow. Then it's on to the speech proper. Since everyone in the room is taking detailed notes, it's unnecessary to refer to a previous argument as anything but "B(1)." (Sort of like

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the prison inmates who knew each other's jokes so well that all a prisoner had to do was say "No. 34" and his cellmates would collapse with laughter.) The velocity of the argument starts to increase—as it must do if the other team is to be well and truly "spread." A current debate textbook notes that "accomplished intercollegiate debaters"—the role models for high school contestants—"speak at an average rate of nearly 270 words a minute."

Quantity of arguments, however, comes at the expense of quality. A practiced "spreader" will cram a multitude of arguments into a four or eight-minute speech, some of them based on mutually exclusive accounts of reality. (Like lawyers, debaters often "argue in the alternative" or, as the debate theoreticians put it, they "hypothesis-test.") And debaters have no compunction about throwing in the rhetorical equivalent of the kitchen sink—say, a claim that establishing a new retirement program in America would trigger a nuclear war by bankrupting the economy and forcing a president to seek support in provocative foreign adventures.

Why make such a potentially embarrassing argument? For one thing, the other team might be "spread" so thin by your other arguments that it will forget to respond to this one, awarding your team the issue when the final reading of the flow sheet is made. Equally important, the absurdity of the argument won't be held against you. In the surreal world of abstraction that is debate, one argument is as good as another—provided that it is supported by a "quote card" from an expert. Conversely, any assertion, however self-evident, that cannot be so corroborated is suspect. As the debaters say, "It ain't hard if it ain't on the card."

THE SPREAD technique may work within the confines of the classroom, but it's not much use when you're speaking to the local Rotary Club or the Democratic National Convention. As a result, high school debate is experiencing something of a counterrevolution. A new competitive event, known as Lincoln-Douglas debate, encourages students to debate questions of value instead of trading Xeroxed blurbs about the "D.A.s" of this or that public policy. Even with traditional "policy" debate, there is a modest rediscovery of communication skills. I was pleased, on a visit to the Georgetown workshop, to hear an instructor actually telling one debater to stand up straight.

There also seems to be a growing emphasis on quality rather than quantity of evidence, which often comes not from debaters' original research but from handbooks that provide prefab evidence. David Cheshier, director of Georgetown's summer high school debate workshop, admits that many debaters used to quote *World Marxist Review* as freely as *Foreign Affairs*. That, he says, is changing.

But to revive debate's role as an exercise in communication, Kennedy proposes a more radical reform: using outsiders as debate judges. The "debate community" is so inbred that many judges are themselves college debaters or ex-debaters, and thus votaries of the flow sheet. Kennedy believes that debate speeches would become a lot more accessible if winning a trophy depended on explaining the "D.A.s" to the sort of people who ultimately will decide whether Dukakis or Bush was more persuasive in their debates.

Try selling that proposition to the debate establishment. Says Cheshier: "The issue is this: Should students who devote all that time immersing themselves in these arguments be judged by people who don't have a very sophisticated understanding of these arguments? The prevailing feeling is that they should not."

The resistance to "lay" judges points up a dirty secret about debate: a lot of its attraction is based on snob appeal. Asked to describe high school debaters, Cheshier notes that "intellectual competition turns them on. They're the same kind of kids who would play fantasy games and war games." Debate as "Dungeons and Dragons"? It's not that farfetched a notion when you consider what debate and D&D have in common: arcane lore, a premium on quick thinking, and the thrill of combat in an imaginary universe. Between rounds at the Georgetown summer workshop, I chatted with a voluble tyro from one of the country's debate powers, the Bronx High School of Science. Did he enjoy debating? Sure, he said, "but it has nothing to do with the real world."

MICHAEL MCGOUGH

Michael McGough is editor of the editorial page of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*.

The collapse of oratory.

BRIEF WHINING MOMENTS

SO FAR in the presidential campaign this year neither candidate nor his running mate has made a speech that was worth hearing or, by any standard other than the meanest calculations of political advantage, worth delivering. What is more, we do not expect to hear anything resembling a memorable speech before the election is over. If voter turnout is lower in 1988 than even in other recent elections, this oratorical void will be one reason. After months of wearisome campaigning, the differences between the candidates and the parties are more blurred than at the beginning. The American people themselves are registering, in opinion surveys, comments to reporters, and simply in what one hears going about one's day—the mood one can pick up almost by osmosis—their dismay and appalled anxiety at the quality of the political debate that is being staged for them this year.

If the decline of campaign oratory was lamented in TNR before the last presidential campaign ("The Decline of Oratory," May 28, 1984), it is not repetitive to raise the cry again. Already we have evidence that there is today even less likelihood that any candidate will deliver a speech that

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is coherent, sustains an argument through more than two brief paragraphs, connects one theme forcefully to another; displays courage, inspires, promises leadership; or simply is honest.

The standard by which we are now to judge the campaign speeches was demonstrated at the two national conventions. Going by the instant reactions of the TV anchormen and all but a few of the print journalists in the following days, one would have thought they had listened spellbound to Demosthenes in Atlanta and Pericles in New Orleans—or Webster, or Calhoun, or Lincoln, or Theodore Roosevelt, or Wilson—or, to be done with it, even Adlai Stevenson. "His splendid acceptance speech," David Broder wrote of George Bush's performance, as if he was purring at one of the Gridiron dinners he enjoys so much. And Broder was not the most extravagant. But where, from Bush's—or rather, Peggy Noonan's—first sentence to his last, was the splendor? What single phrase is even now memorable? No other than Broder himself, only a few weeks later, devoted a column to criticizing the vapidity of both Bush and his opponent.

Even when one speech is supposed to address a single theme, to enlighten us and perhaps to convey an impression of strength and toughness in the candidate, the extent of oratory's decay is still visible. On September 9 a reporter for the *New York Times* who had been following Michael Dukakis wrote of "a day of muscular oratory." One combs his report for the evidence. At last one discovers this Dukakis quote: "How strong do American forces need to be? Strong enough to defend America's interests. Strong enough to meet our treaty commitments. Strong enough to crack down on terrorists, with force if necessary." Some muscle! Some oratory! Nothing in that flatulent paragraph or in the rest of the speech enlightens us about Dukakis's specific intentions. As the reporter notes, the net effect of this muscular oratory was to keep Dukakis's foreign policy aide "scrambling throughout the day to explain what he meant."

THE VERY EXISTENCE of a new profession of political consultants responsible for "spin control" after the candidates have spoken attests to their incapacity to speak intelligibly or forcefully, much less to say what they mean. At the Democratic convention, one of the divisions of the party's media operations was actually called "Spin-Control Coordination." A handbook advised its staff, according to the *Columbia Journalism Review*, to "track location of top Democratic pundits and operatives to work to coordinate their availability to print and broadcast media." Of course press officers and others in the past have tried to explain (away) the occasional indiscretion or indistinct verbiage of politicians. But when these spin-control experts—campaign consultants are always experts—are added to the vast teams of speechwriters—also experts—it is no wonder that the majority of people no longer believes that their politicians are addressing them directly.

Was it ever much better? It was, even quite recently, until the arrival of television. But let us take a stump speech given by Woodrow Wilson during his first presidential campaign in Lincoln, Nebraska, on October 5, 1912. Like Dukakis, Wilson was relatively unknown, his only apparent credentials a career as a university professor and as governor of New Jersey. And like Dukakis, he faced a Republican challenger whose party had occupied the White House for the past eight years. Moreover, not only was Wilson up against the incumbent William Howard Taft, he was himself threatened by the formidable Theodore Roosevelt, the Bull Moose candidate supported by most of the Progressives.

NEBRASKA WAS a strongly Progressive state, and Wilson chose as his subject the then politically charged issue of monopoly. He began by directly confronting Roosevelt by name, providing an incisive analysis of TR's position in seven fairly long paragraphs. Saying that "I am not in this campaign engaged in doubting any man's motives"—a claim Bush cannot make today—he accused the monopolists of being not "a body of deliberate enemies, maybe, but a body of mistaken men," and added that the "only hope of a program of human uplift" from the Republican Party and its Bull Moose rump "is that the monopolists will cooperate." Then he closed in on Roosevelt:

> And what I want to point out to you is that Mr. Roosevelt subscribes to the judgment of these mistaken men as to the influences which should govern America. That is the serious part of it. Mr. Roosevelt's judgment has been captured. Mr. Roosevelt's idea of the way in which the industries of this country should be controlled has been captured.

Wilson was in fact making a deadly political attack—stripping TR of his claim to independence; he had been captured—but the words, manner, and tone of the whole passage relied on connected cerebral argument to stimulate and persuade his Nebraska audience. Bush deals with his opponent only by innuendo charged with spite, and Dukakis parries so feebly that he can hardly bring himself to use his opponent's name—with the exception of the pathetic "Where was George" refrain.

Wilson's attack on Roosevelt was itself only a prelude to the unfolding of his views on monopolists and the trusts, the changes they were causing in the lives of ordinary Americans, and their far too great influence at the elbow of government on a wide range of policies: tariffs, banking, conservation, and so on. On conservation he was taking on the issue Roosevelt had made his own, indeed, introduced to the center of political concern. Did Wilson waffle?

> What is our fear about conservation? The hands that will be stretched out to monopolize our forests, to pre-empt the use of our great power-producing streams, the hands that will be stretched into the bowels of the earth to take possession of the great riches that lie hidden in Alaska and elsewhere in the incomparable domain of the United States, are the hands of monopoly. . . .

And so to the rhetorical conclusion to which he has built: "The question of conservation is a great deal bigger than the question of saving our forests and our mineral resources and our waters. It is as big as the life and happiness and

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No Bull.

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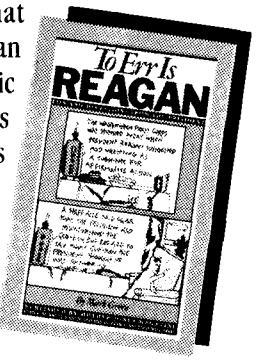

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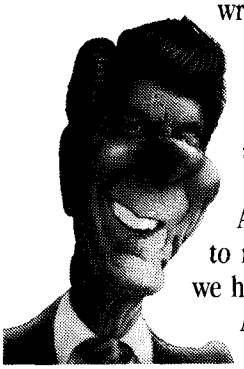

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strength and elasticity and hope of our people." It is the word "elasticity" that springs the full force of the passage, the unexpected word that provokes us to think and make new connections, that energizes us; the unexpected word we never hear in this campaign. Both Bush and Dukakis are trying to grab the issue of conservation, but neither has confronted it with the directness of Wilson. On September 2 Bush described himself laughably as "a Theodore Roosevelt conservationist," because he cannot claim to be a conservationist in his own right. Bush does not point to the commercial interests that have dumped in Boston Harbor for decades. Neither does he even hint at how he will deal with yet more powerful interests that will be at the elbow of government on the issue of the environment.

After hearing Wilson's speech—a speech he delivered on a relatively insignificant occasion—we do not need to ask a second time if this man would be a strong president. Neither do we have the slightest difficulty in grasping the character of the man—come from Princeton and New Jersey to Nebraska—or what we now curiously call an "identity." An identity is what is established in a birth certificate, driver's license, identity card, or, indeed, a fingerprint. But today pundits worry whether the candidates have successfully established their "identities."

It was Bush and not Dukakis who was said to have identified himself most successfully in his convention speech. He said he regards the presidency as "an incomparable opportunity for 'gentle persuasion.' " That was not the kind of leadership Wilson was offering—or John Kennedy, or (to look abroad) Margaret Thatcher, or any worthwhile candidate; and neither is it the kind of leadership the presidency exists to provide. The art of "gentle persuasion" is a skill, and a useful one; but it is not the edge of leadership. Bush said, "I want a kinder, gentler nation," which is sweet, but it doesn't tell us much about the man or what policies he will pursue and with what command. Then Bush identified himself by his "ordinariness." He and his wife in Texas lived "in a little shotgun house, one room for the three of us . . . had six children . . . moved from the shotgun to a duplex apartment to a house. . . ." It was pap. But Bush tried to make a virtue of it, and the media applauded him for his boast that he cannot speak. "I may not be the most eloquent. . . . I may sometimes be a little awkward. . . . I am a quiet man. . . . I'll try to hold my charisma in check." Just plain folks for president.

SO WHAT has happened? If the blame for the further decline of American political oratory can be assigned to any one factor, it is to television. Certainly television has wrecked political conventions; that has been obvious for some time. It was in 1972 that people could still be aghast at the scripted convention of Richard Nixon, with everything ordered for the cameras. But the once lively and even brawling Democrats—whose 1972 convention got so out of hand that George McGovern didn't deliver his acceptance speech until the wee hours—followed the Republican lead this year, with predictable mediocrity and yawns. Conventions used to be events where the unexpected happened. Television does not permit that. Conventions are now literally scripted for prime-time entertainment. And this year, after orchestrating the life right out of them, television executives have the gall to say that conventions may have become too dull to merit live coverage.

But beyond the death of political conventions is the continuing influence of the television reporters, anchormen, and commentators who have forced politicians to speak in "bites" of 30 seconds for 90-second slots. We are now nearing the end of eight years in which a president who does not really lead by his speeches has been praised for being a "great communicator." The euphemism is necessary because he does not make speeches. The irony points to the uncomfortable truth that the communications industry—the media—recognized a package of its own manufacture and labeled it Great Communicator. It is not out of political conviction that the media has given Reagan so easy a ride. The relationship is one of symbiosis. Anchormen read scripts; politicians read scripts. Anchormen talk in bites; politicians talk in bites. Anchormen speak over pictures; politicians speak over pictures. Anchormen don't have to say anything; politicians don't have to say anything. "Good Morning America" is a television program; "It's morning in America" is a politician's slogan. Politicians merge into Brokaw, Jennings, Rather, and they merge into the politicians they have chosen. They are all, in the end, great communicators, while saying as little as possible.

IN THIS electoral season, one other convention speech was praised. That of Jesse Jackson. I do not share the virulent fear of and hostility to Jackson of some people. In fact, I wonder why they think he is so important. Perhaps because he's such good media fodder. But his speech at the convention was not much of a speech. What was moving in it was the occasion: a black within striking distance of the presidency, and the elderly black faces in the audience that reflected how far they had come and how far yet to go. A demagogue not someone who commands his audience; he is someone who surrenders to it. And in Jackson's oratory there was no such command. He gave what was expected, all he is capable of, schmoozed the media, and left nothing at all unchanged. Even the delivery was false. Carrying the oratory of Martin Luther King Jr. were the true cadences of the Southern pulpit. The repetition of words and constructions were not meant to elicit only an "Amen" from the audience; they were vehicles to carry the audience forward to another plane, one to which they had never expected to be taken. To join people, that was King's aim. Read his speech before the Lincoln Memorial on that still un-repeated day. Read how he makes people see farther than themselves. "I have a dream"—yes, we all remember that. "Let freedom ring"—yes, we remember that. But then watch how King took the dream, and made freedom ring:

> So let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York. Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of

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Pennsylvania. Let freedom ring from the snowcapped Rockies of Colorado. Let freedom ring from the curvaceous peaks of California.

So far he has not mentioned one Southern state:

But not only that; let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia. Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee. Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi. From every mountainside, let freedom ring.

Not a syllable now rings any less true. There was in that oratory the substance of a man; and given that, no less than in Wilson, there was a substance of argument that preceded the rise to full eloquence. Was Jackson anywhere near that in Atlanta?

Oratory is not a matter of artistry. It must come from a single source. But election campaigns are now more out of the hands of the people than ever they were in the days of the smoke-filled rooms. A vast community of professional and well-fattened advisers and consultants now create their puppets, and what holds the community together is an uninformed media, talking to the speechwriter and not the speech-giver, who direct our attention only to the strings they pull. Leadership doesn't have a chance.

Who the tax cheats are and how to get at them.

RICH PICKINGS

BY JAMES S. HENRY

BOTH PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES are coy to the point of deception about their plans for addressing the federal budget deficit. Vice President Bush proposes what he calls a "flexible freeze," but refuses to specify which programs would suffer the large real cuts his plan mathematically would require. (See "Bushlit" by Susan Irving, TNR, August 1.) Governor Dukakis's magic bullet is better tax enforcement. He proposes stiffer penalties for evasion; doubling the Internal Revenue Service's audit rate (from 1.2 percent to 2.5 percent of all individual tax returns); and a one-time amnesty on penalties and prosecution for tax cheats who come forward and pay what they owe, modeled after a similar state amnesty several years ago in Massachusetts. Dukakis claims that a federal amnesty could bring in up to $38 billion, while increased audits might deliver another $47 billion more *per year*.

While Bush's "flexible freeze" is an outright fraud, Dukakis's tax enforcement scheme is merely a good idea whose benefits he grossly exaggerates. Dukakis's amnesty proposal was recently endorsed in the *Wall Street Journal* by the Supply Side medicine man himself, Arthur Laffer, who claimed it would bring in $40 billion to $60 billion.

But Dukakis, even as he exaggerates the fiscal payoff, has characteristically failed to package his enforcement scheme in an appealing way. Bush accuses Dukakis of "operating from the premise that most Americans must be guilty, and that we need more IRS agents to stalk them in their homes." In fact, the IRS's enforcement budget has been shrinking in real terms, a dubious way to save money when every enforcement dollar brings in more than a dollar ($2.60, according to a 1986 IRS survey) in revenue. Everyone knows people who cheat on their taxes, and most people suspect—correctly—that there's a lot more cheating at the upper end of the income scale. It ought to be easy for Dukakis to put himself on the side of honest, middle-class taxpayers and Bush on the side of rich cheaters.

There is, as well, a more high-minded angle than pure class resentment. The justified feeling that many are evading their commitment to help finance our common enterprise as Americans erodes the sense of national community. Making every citizen confident that other citizens are paying their fair share is a matter of . . . yes, simple patriotism.

The past few years have seen an explosion of research on the question of tax compliance. In 1987 the American Bar Foundation finished a three-year study of the factors affecting noncompliance. The National Academy of Sciences has also just recently completed a lengthy project on this subject. Only last month the IRS published its own detailed compendium of noncompliance estimates. Meanwhile, we also have a crop of 18 state amnesties to learn from.

Obviously, estimating the size of something that is hiding from you will never become an exact science, but a consensus has begun to emerge regarding federal income tax evasion. The IRS estimates that the federal income "tax gap"—the amount of corporate and individual income taxes that are owed but not paid—is between $73 billion and $87 billion for 1988.

The IRS estimates do not support Dukakis's claim that there is a growing "epidemic of evasion." While the amount of evasion is indeed higher than we used to think, it apparently has always been higher. According to the latest research, about 16 percent to 17 percent of the taxes due on legal income have gone unpaid each year since at least 1973. (This doesn't include unpaid taxes on income

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from illegal sources like drug trafficking, which has probably been growing faster than the legal sector, but if we were really interested in maximizing the tax yield of such activities they would not be illegal to begin with.)

BUT THE *annual rate* of tax evasion is just one way to look at it. Another perspective is the *cumulative stock* of evasion, past and present, because taxes evaded last year are still owed. Each year's tax gap should really be viewed as a continuing liability on the cheaters' books. Until the statute of limitations runs out, the IRS is free to collect this debt, if only it can find the "borrowers." (The current statute of limitations for civil fraud is just three years. For criminal tax fraud it is six years, or even longer, if there is a continuing cover-up. Why these statutes should be so short is a good question.) And regardless of the statute of limitations, from an economic viewpoint, yesterday's evasion is an interest-free loan that the tax cheats have extracted from the rest of us. The cumulative "present value" of past evasion is the appropriate measure of its burden because, for a given level of spending, the rest of us have to make up the difference, either with increased federal debt or increased taxes.

Over time the "evader debt" has become huge. If we cumulate the annual tax gap estimates, deduct the fraction of the gap that the IRS ultimately collects, and impute an interest charge to the remaining loan, the tax cheats have been able to borrow an incredible $1.6 trillion, interest-free, from the rest of us *since 1972*. This is roughly equal to 60 percent of the total federal deficit. By now the interest alone saved each year by the tax cheats on these forced loans—the extra interest or taxes that honest folks have to pay to make up for the lost evasion dollars—is almost $100 billion a year, *in addition to a particular year's tax cheating.*

Most of these "evasion loans" were probably consumed rather than invested. But up to half of the missing taxes involved income on capital, and may still be around. A plausible estimate is that the stock of "evader wealth" could easily be worth over $300 billion—a tempting target for tax collectors. Of this, at least $200 billion has been accumulated since President Reagan and Vice President Bush took office.

Who are the tax cheaters? One important clue in solving this puzzle is that an ever smaller proportion of federal tax revenues depends on voluntary compliance. In the last two decades the tax system has also become increasingly dependent on excise and Social Security taxes, as well as on automatic withholding for the collection of individual income taxes. The share of federal taxes withheld, assessed, or collected by third parties has risen steadily, from about two-thirds in 1950 to over 90 percent now.

If the fraction of all taxes amenable to evasion has shrunk, while the fraction of all taxes actually evaded has remained roughly the same, that means that the people who are *able* to evade taxes must be doing a lot more of it. These people are not ordinary wage earners, whose income and Social Security taxes are withheld on their payroll slips.

One cluster of evasion is on the entrepreneurial frontier, where bureaucracy breaks down, automatic withholding is impossible, and auditors go blind trying to find paper trails. Over two-thirds of federal income tax evasion now involves unreported income, not overstated deductions or false credits. From an auditor's standpoint, this maddening fact means that there is often nothing to check. Most of the "underreporting," in turn, accrues to small businesses and the self-employed—the heroes of Reaganomics. If the new IRS estimates are correct, fully half the annual "tax gap" is attributable to this group. They account for over half of all unreported income and over 40 percent of the 1988 tax gap: about $37 billion in lost taxes. The income of unincorporated farms accounts for another ten percent of the annual gap: about $8 billion. Considering the billions the federal government spends each year subsidizing farmers, this is especially grating. The cumulative "evasion loan" from the government to small businesses and farmers is over $830 billion.

Another significant pocket of evasion is investors and large corporations. Since 1972 the cumulative "evasion loan" to investors and large corporations—which are also owned in large part by investors—amounts to over $443 billion.

"Enterprise labor" is at the bottom of the evasion ladder. This category includes people who work in jobs where the IRS is able to withhold from paychecks. That is, it represents ordinary working Americans. Enterprise labor's cumulative evasion loan since 1972 is only $106 billion, less than ten percent of the total. Much of this turns out to have come from unreported tips and pension fund incomes.

NOTING THE dimensions of tax evasion is one thing. Doing something practical about it is another. The IRS's estimated annual tax gap of $73 billion to $87 billion is the product of noncompliance by at least 3.5 million people who owe money but don't file returns at all and at least 45 million others who file inaccurate returns! That's out of about 120 million taxpayers, meaning a cheat rate of about 40 percent. This is consistent with the results of the IRS's audit program, which finds "noncompliance" in about half the 55,000 returns it audits each year. The amount of noncompliance per audited taxpayer is usually fairly small. The average amount of extra tax turned up even by the IRS's most rigorous audit is less than $400, or $800 if you exclude the half that turns out to be completely honest. The typical tax dodger is a small-scale cheater, not a professional tax evader.

Now even these best audits are known to miss a large amount of income—so large, in fact, that to arrive at its latest noncompliance estimates the IRS scales up its audit findings by more than 3-to-1. But the low *per audit* results show how hard the IRS might have to search to close the tax gap, even if its best examiners were turned loose on the entire population. The problem is that collecting taxes also has a cost. Compliance costs include not only the IRS's own audit and collection costs but also those borne by taxpayers—keeping records, hiring accountants, relearning the tax code, and preparing returns, plus less tangible

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costs like invasions of privacy. *Increased* enforcement would cost more than current levels of enforcement for each dollar brought in because, at least at the federal level, many of the lowest-cost enforcement options are already in use.

The problem is to strike a balance between the costs of evasion and the costs of compliance. "Perfect compliance" is no more rational a goal than is "zero population" or "zero murders." We really need several different strategies to deal with noncompliance.

A GOOD PLACE to begin is with large corporations, where a Dukakis IRS really could use more auditors, and more detailed audits—but perhaps fewer audits each year! The current IRS practice of auditing almost every large corporation each year makes little sense. It would be far better to audit, say, ten percent of large corporations very intensively each year—deterrence theory applies to corporations as well as to individuals. There is little excuse for the IRS failing to collect the $15 billion of taxes that it admits to losing from large corporations (those worth over $100 million) each year. After all, this population of evaders is well known and few in number, and most of its misbehavior involves overstatements of expenses, which is easier to catch than underreporting of income. In the process, the IRS may also learn a lot about the incomes of smaller businesses that supply or buy from the giants.

Much more can be done with property incomes, especially capital gains. The IRS's latest "tax gap" estimates in this area are very conservative. The capital gains tax gap, for example, totals just $18 billion for 1981-87, implying missing income of about $60 billion, which seems remarkably low during the years of the stock market boom. The IRS should demand better reporting on offshore investments by U.S. investors. If I sell my GE stock through my Hong Kong or Panama City broker, there is still no reporting to the IRS.

In the small business and self-employment sector, getting increased compliance through increased audits and traditional enforcement approaches is going to be costly. If we were really going to go after this sector, for example, we'd have to do much more than simply "return the audit rate to its 1977 level," as Dukakis suggests. Better enforcement in this area will probably require more industry-wide investigations, greater use of paid informants (some have suggested a five percent "snitch fee" for turning in evading neighbors), sting operations, and other intrusive methods. These approaches all have to be used carefully. They have relatively high costs, both in terms of dollars and rights.

One implication of the evasion debt, and the "evader wealth" associated with it, is a strong argument for reinvigorating the federal estate tax, whose annual yield is now trivial. From a compliance standpoint the estate tax is much easier to enforce than the income tax. At least for the fraction of evasion that is saved rather than consumed it would give tax authorities another bite at the apple.

Dukakis's estimate that $47 billion per year could be brought in by more rigorous auditing was extracted from a very unpersuasive Cal Tech research paper. But there is every good reason to experiment with increased audits, and no reason not to. Several other researchers have suggested that they might have an important ripple effect—increasing honesty among all taxpayers, not just those who are audited. Since the IRS's entire auditing budget is now only $1.5 billion, such an experiment would not be very expensive, compared with the potential gains. But even if the audit rate were doubled this would probably not cut the "tax gap" by half, as Dukakis suggests.

We also should not overestimate how much a federal income tax amnesty would bring in. The 18 recent state amnesties raised about $800 million total. But two-thirds of the revenues raised in the four biggest states was money paid by taxpayers who were already known to be evading. The amnesties worked best precisely in those states like Massachusetts that had *lousy* enforcement programs to begin with. At the federal level, where a pretty good audit and enforcement program is already in place, the threat of improved enforcement after the amnesty would not be as effective.

In a sense we already have far too much amnesty for tax evaders. The three-year statute of limitations for civil fraud may be just as important as the low and declining audit rate in tempting evaders to take risks with the law. It means that over three-fourths of the accumulated evasion debt since 1973 has already been written off. Since serious evaders are likely to be repeat evaders, the incentive to evade would be significantly reduced if the IRS were free to open up someone's entire financial history once he or she had been caught cheating.

The Reagan IRS's own best guess is that about a third of the "tax gap" could be collected with full funding for *existing* strategies, and that about a third of this "collectible" portion is already being reached. This means that at least $15 billion to $20 billion extra per year is still on the table, not quite enough to balance the budget, but clearly worth reaching for. Why the Reagan administration has let this easily collectible money go uncollected is a valid political question.

THE NEW research on tax evasion suggests one other important policy conclusion. Public attitudes toward government and taxes turn out to be important influences on the level of tax compliance. In the world of small business and self-employment, many potential evaders are likely to remain beyond the reach of the tax collector no matter what we do. For them compliance remains largely an act of choice. Evasion is also often a social act, involving tolerance for other people's misbehavior—"Make it out to cash," "Give me a receipt," and so forth. From this standpoint a Dukakis administration might well have a very positive impact on tax compliance, just by purging our national leadership of people who advertise their contempt for government and demonstrate that contempt in their ethical behavior. An honest administration frankly proud of what the government accomplishes for American society might thus bring in extra billions without lifting a finger. Surely that would be the best of all possible worlds—greater compliance without more enforcement. □

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STANLEY KAUFFMANN ON FILMS

Troubles Along the Way

Miles from Home
(Cinecom)

Running on Empty
(Warner Bros.)

Two weeks ago, a passel of films based on silly ideas. Now, examples of something hardly new but even worse: films with good initial ideas and no clue about what to do with them. The authors—along with the uncredited others who have tugged, cut, and inserted—have had no ideas about their ideas; so in each case they have gone to the files for formulas to fill out that bothersome interlude between the beginning of a film and the final shot.

Chris Gerolmo has a promising start for *Miles from Home*. He knew that Nikita Khrushchev had visited a "typical" Iowa farm in 1959, and Gerolmo wondered what that model farm might be like today in a time of FHA foreclosures and other farming difficulties. Modern farm troubles aren't a fresh film topic, of course, but the juxtaposition of 1959 atmospherics and today's situation might have been used to dramatic effect. Gerolmo doesn't use it at all—not one jot.

The film begins in black and white with Khrushchev's visit and his meeting with the farmer and his two small sons—later played by Richard Gere and Kevin Anderson. Then we fade to today in color, after which no real use is made of the hoopla opening. It's hardly even referred to. Instead of a visit by the Soviet premier, it might as well have been a presentation of some 4-H awards to mark a peak from which the farm has descended.

After abandoning his springboard, Gerolmo grabs for a lot of limp fillers. The farm fails; the bank forecloses; and the two brothers, now alone on the place, go through movie-routine drinking and vindictive destruction. They hit the road, stealing cars as they go, and soon become Iowa folk heroes. They're vicarious outlets for frustration, I guess—certainly not champions of the poor, not even as much as Bonnie and Clyde. Sex is needed in the film, so there's a way-stop at the home of a widow who immediately itches for Gere—it just happens that her husband lost his farm, too. And there's a sweet young thing who, quicker than Sanka becomes coffee, develops instant loyalty to Anderson. And there's a stripper in a bar who likes both brothers and, knowing they need money, arranges an interview with a journalist—who pays them with an attaché case packed with $100 bills. When the going gets even thinner, Gerolmo pulls from nowhere an unpredicted son-and-dead-father resentment, just to pad Gere's part. When it gets still thinner, Gerolmo gives us the fist fight between the boys that was *not* unpredicted; then he ends the scene with that stock TV moment in which two warring members of a family embrace in tears and admit their love for each other. The whole script is an attenuated mess that tries to supply 115 more minutes of film in order to justify the first five minutes.

Gere doesn't help much. His superficial emoting fits the superficial hot writing too well. Anderson, as the naive young brother, does much better, rather sweetly taking experience into himself and considering it. Gary Sinise, who has shown talent as a theater director, shows less with his first film directing. Clichés entangle him: figures posed against the sunset, long shots framed through stalks of corn or gaps in fences, much shooting from below eye level to make his characters epic, much use of slanting light through windows for no intrinsic reason. And the music track is weird. Rock and country music, even quotations from Copland's "outdoor" pieces, OK; but why in Amadeus's name that long Mozart passage?

Naomi Foner, who also was one of the producers, wrote *Running on Empty*, which all too soon lives up to its title. Here again the idea was promising: the life today of two '60s radicals, man and wife, who have been fugitives from the FBI for 20 years, moving precipitately when the feds come close. The situation is now complicated because the couple have two sons, 17 and (about) 12.

Imagination and purpose were called for in this screenplay. There's not a great deal of material available (so far as I know) on the domestic lives of such fugitives, and the author who treated them had to be able to begin imaginatively at the center and work outward. More, she had to have some purpose in doing it—not a thesis, necessarily, but some honest, pressing inquiry. Foner quickly shows that she is relying more on her memory of family films than on sympathetic imagination and that her only real purpose (like Gerolmo's) was to exploit her good springboard. Nothing that is developed in the film enlightens us convincingly about the thoughts and afterthoughts of such people, other than the mechanics of concealment.

So we get hand-me-down fillers: a birthday party for mom, a visit to mom by a still-active radical who still has a yen for her, to which—quite incredibly—she responds. He's there only to

FILMS WORTH SEEING

A Fish Called Wanda. John Cleese flourishes even after the breakup of Monty Python in this frequently funny farce about Anglo-American teamwork in a London bank heist. (Reviewed 8/29/88)

The Last Temptation of Christ. Martin Scorsese directs with feverish energy, Willem Dafoe plays Jesus with vernacular conviction in this utterly serious, occasionally moving account of a Christ with mortal qualities. (9/12&19/88)

Midnight Run. A trite and noisy story, about an investigator bringing a crook across the country, but the scenes between Robert De Niro and Charles Grodin are nuttily flavorful. (8/29/88)

Pascali's Island. Ben Kingsley, Charles Dance, and Helen Mirren, in that order, are the reasons for seeing this attenuated picture about intrigue on an Aegean island in 1908. (8/8&15/88)

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plant a plot twist that could have been handled otherwise and to fill a few minutes of screen time. We get inconsistencies: at the start, in Florida, the husband is active in labor organizing. A man who's hiding from the FBI? Then when the family flees to New Jersey, he forgets all about his labor interests.

Foner has so little to say about the main subjects that she concentrates on the problems of the 17-year-old son, problems that would have been very much the same if his parents had been only common criminals now hunted by cops, instead of idealists who committed crimes for a cause. The boy, played by River Phoenix, gets seriously involved with a girl in his New Jersey high school, and his father—unbelievably—assents. What if she had become pregnant? What about the family's concealment then? Foner also makes the boy a piano talent who developed through the fugitive years on a practice keyboard. (There's just one line about his mother's having been a pianist. Presumably she taught him, though there's no piano in their home.) Juilliard wants him, and the only way he can go there is if the family, which must stay undercover, resign themselves to not seeing him again. Especially since, at the end, they have to flee from New Jersey. This is the sobby climax to which all the heavy political trappings lead.

The promise of a politically meaty film, such as an American Francesco Rosi might have given us, is washed away by popularized plottings, few of which are rooted in the original idea. Sidney Lumet directs, with little of the subtle camera use in *The Verdict*. The only Lumet touches are, as almost always, in the direction of actors. Judd Hirsch, he of the Neanderthal brow, plays the husband, and though he barks along as usual, he gets somewhat more color into it. A long scene in which Phoenix and his girlfriend, Martha Plimpton, wander through the woods and along a beach is handled with freshness. And Christine Lahti, so memorable in *Housekeeping*, gives the wife more vitality than the lines themselves suggest. When Lahti meets her wealthy father, Steven Hill, for the first time in 14 years, it's obviously one of those moments designed to be a Big Scene. Lahti and Hill, under Lumet, play it so acutely that it ceases to be a scene at all. It happens.

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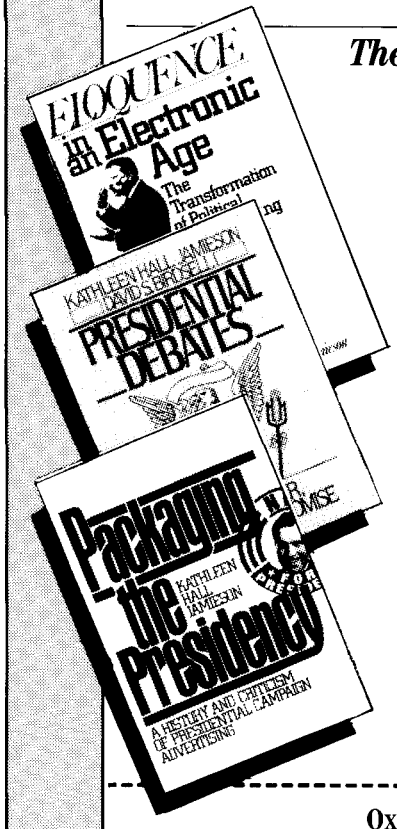

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these two films will surely be cited as examples of Hollywood's concern with social and political issues. Unfortunately, this is true. This viewer would be happier if, instead of fiddling and finking with serious matters, Hollywood stuck to entertainment. Better good program features within the Movieland boundaries than the trimming of serious matters on the way to the bank.

ROBERT BRUSTEIN ON THEATER

Cycles of Lincoln Center

Theater at Lincoln Center has always been the litmus test of chemical changes in our stage culture, thus an inordinate focus of critical concern. Other Lincoln Center constituencies were able to draw on established artistic institutions like the Met, the City Center Opera, and the New York City Ballet. Lacking a nationally recognized component, theater at Lincoln Center had to start from zero. The initial 1964 season (produced under a tent in Washington Square while the Vivian Beaumont was being constructed) represented an early effort to graft Broadway values onto the skin of subsidized repertory theater. The director Elia Kazan and producer Robert Whitehead attempted to form a resident acting company, even to set up a training program. But these gifted men had no prior experience, nor had they shown any prior interest, in classical plays. The inaugural repertory—Miller's *After the Fall*, Behrman's *But for Whom, Charlie?*, O'Neill's *Marco Millions*—would have been more appropriate on the commercial stage.

I was an early critic of this leadership, earning a reputation as a minor prophet when Kazan's first brush with a classic, *The Changeling*, proved a second season disaster. In his fascinating and repellent new autobiography, Kazan claims that it was my predictions and those of Richard Gilman that influenced the Lincoln Center board to terminate his leadership—prematurely, he argues, since he was already making changes to improve the company and the plays. It is barely possible that, with time and patience, the Kazan-Whitehead regime might have developed an effective repertory theater. It is beyond dispute that the action of the board was abrupt and humiliating. But since the non-profit theater movement had originated as an alternative to Broadway, I thought it perverse to hand over the reins of a resident company to men whose values were formed in the commercial system. Even Kazan—though "mad as hell" about being the butt of "critical target practice"—admitted doubt about whether "this was really what I wanted to do."

I nominated Joseph Papp, head of the New York Shakespeare Festival, to take over the Beaumont and either the Living Theatre or the Actors Workshop and to run the experimental second stage of the Mitzi Newhouse. The board elected Herbert Blau and Jules Irving of the Actors Workshop to administer the entire complex. Their first season choices (*Danton's Death, The Condemned of Altona, The Caucasian Chalk Circle*) were infinitely more ambitious than those of Kazan and Whitehead, but the San Francisco company lacked major acting talent, and impatient critics, including myself, were primed for instant results. Blau, who had been making inflated policy statements, resigned under fire. Irving continued as caretaker, scheduling a series of solid, conventional classical seasons that kept the stages active without exciting either negative or positive passions.

The board had turned to Broadway for the first leadership and to the resident theater for the second. For the third, it belatedly beckoned to Joseph Papp, by then the Public Theater architect of a successful off-Broadway workshop system that had engineered such Broadway hits as *A Chorus Line, Pavlo Hummel*, and *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. But by this time Papp was less interested in classical company work than in what he called "hunchbacked plays"—dramatic experiments by young American writers—and when he proved unable to promote these to a middle-class audience he clearly despised, he resigned in disgust, declaring that Lincoln Center was bankrupting his downtown operation. After a single disastrous season by his successor, Richmond Crinkley, the Beaumont went dark.

Crinkley appeared to have no policy other than to redesign the stage of the Beaumont. Following a long interregnum, Gregory Mosher of the Goodman Theatre was appointed in 1985, later joined by Papp's former associate Bernard Gersten. They had no policy to declare either. Their silence was partly a matter of prudence. Always a luscious target for us critical snipers, the Beaumont was never more vulnerable, as Blau had learned, than when publishing fiery manifestos. Mosher laid low for a year, declining interviews or muttering vague generalities about his plans. At the Goodman he had always been more interested in the second stage (which developed Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross* and Rabe's *Hurly Burly*) than in the main house (with its obligatory *Christmas Carol*). At Lincoln Center he expressed his desire to do new American plays and South African protest drama at the Newhouse, but his design for the Beaumont remained undefined.

Mosher's initial Beaumont productions were a mixed bag of revivals (*House of Blue Leaves, The Front Page, Comedy of Errors*)—relatively safe choices suggesting no particular artistic identity other than to fill a vacuum for straight plays. Following last year's unusually popular season, however, Mosher and Gersten have been more willing to discuss their intentions. And while they still refuse to define their theater, a pattern, if not a policy, has begun to emerge. It is one I find deeply troubling, especially since I admire both these men and consider them my friends. But what they are currently proposing for Lincoln Center seems to me more a product of expediency than of vision. It is a strategy motivated less by a love of dramatic art than a passion for expansion.

Currently, Lincoln Center advertises four productions: *Anything Goes, Speed-the-Plow, Sarafina*, and *Road*. *Speed-the-Plow* and *Sarafina* are in Broadway houses. *Road* is at La Mama. Only *Anything Goes* is on a Lincoln Center stage, and it has been there all year. Like the decision to produce on Broadway, the decision to let a successful show play out its box-office run at the Beaumont transforms Lincoln Center willy-nilly into a commercial operation. It was always obvious that Mosher and Gersten had no interest in forming a permanent classical company, though this was the original mandate of Lincoln Center theater. There were no doubt compelling practical reasons for this decision: most American theaters have long abandoned the repertory system for sequential productions of indi-

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vidual plays with pickup casts. Still, abandoning repertory is hardly the same as abandoning a season of scheduled plays when a hit proves too expensive to move to a commercial house. Imagine if the Met had resolved to devote a whole season to *Madama Butterfly* or the New York City Ballet to *The Nutcracker Suite*.

Mosher and Gersten do not intend to stop producing next year. Just as they elected to stage *Speed-the-Plow* at the Royale when *Boy's Life* was still packing them in at the Newhouse, so they have announced a season at the Lyceum Theatre on Broadway ("Lincoln Center in Exile") while *Anything Goes* continues its voyage at the Beaumont. Thus far the Lyceum season consists of *Our Town*. Two more plays yet to be selected will no doubt be equally daring. They are bound to be less startling than the venue.

A FEW COMMERCIAL producers—not the Shuberts, who are happy to lease one of their empty houses—have been grumbling over the plan. They claim this invasion of their turf represents unfair competition—an ironic reversal when some of them have been using resident theaters as tryout stations for Broadway material. Nor are the actors' and stagehands' unions delirious about making concessions to a non-profit theater producing on Broadway, even with lower ticket prices. (Mosher and Gersten argue that the APA once received concessions at the Lyceum—but the APA was a classical repertory company, not a Broadway substitute.) Apart from these, however, few voices are being raised in opposition. Ruefully defending Gersten's position, Papp declares that the "nonprofit theater's greatest task is to stay alive" and that its basic principle, apart from eschewing personal gain, is to produce plays "it doesn't matter where." But it is saddening when the marketplace pressures of the Reagan age turn the visionary founders of the institutional movement into weary pragmatists whose primary goal is survival.

Lincoln Center, whose auspices have been deadly to seasoned professionals, has a long record of reaching out to success and turning it into failure. To escape the curse, Mosher and Gersten seek to reverse the spear: "We're attempting to devise a not-for-profit theater of the '90s." Devising any kind of theater at Lincoln Center has always been a fearfully difficult task, but let us pray that this one doesn't prove a universal model. Kazan and Whitehead brought Broadway to the subsidized theater. Mosher and Gersten are planning to bring the subsidized theater to Broadway, and Broadway to the Beaumont. The cycle is complete, but the result is pretty much the same. Well, not quite the same—at least Kazan and Whitehead made an effort to build a company for a single building, a consecutive season, a declared identity. By contrast and in retrospect, they are almost beginning to look like flaming idealists.

The commercialization of the subsidized theater is now so far advanced that few remember the original purposes for which it was conceived. But forget about principles. Let my final warning be a practical one. By becoming a producing team rather than artistic leaders of theater, Mosher and Gersten will soon be subject to the same vagaries as any other Broadway entrepreneurs. At present they are riding a wave of success, and no one likes to argue with full houses. But they are likely, like the rest of us mortals, to have their failures. What will happen when the box office no longer suffices to lift their enterprise and their productions fail to transfer? What loyal constituency will they have developed—among subscribers, foundations, government, or the business community—

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primed to aid a theater with a deficit-ridden budget but a strong and valid identity? The fiscal advantage of non-profit theater over Broadway is not just tax-free status or reasonable union scales but the presence of a circle of supporters who understand and share the theater's defined goals. If the primary goal of Lincoln Center is simply success and survival, then it is indistinguishable from any other theater on Broadway and equally vulnerable to the caprices of fashion.

I continue to believe that New York City cannot call itself a theater center until it supports at least one major classical acting company. Lincoln Center has always been its logical home, but I recognize that many different theater structures are possible there. For example, it might be a home for the range of American drama, with revivals produced at the Beaumont and new plays at the Mitzi Newhouse. What it cannot be, in my opinion, is a subsidized prop for a capricious and improvised commercial structure that is buckling at the knees. "The continuing movement of the non-profit theater to Broadway," Gersten is quoted as saying in *Variety*, "is the best thing that's happened to Broadway in 15 years." That may very well be. What my friend fails to tell us is what this augurs for the fading principles of non-profit theater.

Postlude: Soon after this article was written, I learned that the only show so far scheduled for the Mitzi Newhouse this season—Mike Nichols's all-star production of *Waiting for Godot*—will open instead in a Broadway house because of an unprecedented demand for tickets. What has been billed as a Lincoln Center "exile" is beginning to look like a total expatriation.

KISSINGER'S REVENGE

The Shah's Last Ride: The Fate of an Ally
by William Shawcross

(Simon and Schuster, 432 pp., $19.95)

Scheherazade would have known what to do with the tale of the fall of the Shah. ("It has come to me, oh King of the Age, that a king was driven out of his domain and a ferocious mullah donned in black put him to flight . . ."). A decade after the fall of the Shah, the chroniclers keep coming with more tales to tell. In this tale of the Persian king who left his country with a handful of soil, there is something for every sort of storyteller and sage. In one genre, the cruel despot, the "crowned cannibal," is put to flight and an avenger inherits the ruins. In another version, the prince at the helm was a fraud all along, a feeble man who would have survived if he had unleashed his army against the crowd, if he had had the stomach and the nerves for a fight. Some of the storytellers and the sages could even have seen it coming, the terrible storm, the fall after the hubris. But their warnings were not heeded by the Oriental despot, or by his American handlers in Washington.

William Shawcross has come forward with a new tale of the Shah. In his chronicle, we escort the Persian monarch on his last journey in search of a place of exile. We see the king dispossessed, stripped of power or pretension. The retainers, the flatterers are gone. So are the distance and the space that make for majesty and awe. He had been imperious and oppressive when he ruled, but in Shawcross's account the Shah becomes a sympathetic figure, roaming a hostile and indifferent world, forsaken by allies and friends.

Others have given us the Shah as Hamlet, weak and indecisive. Shawcross presents the Shah as Richard II. In *Richard II*, the most lyrical of Shakespeare's history plays, the drama lay not in Richard's reign, but in his fall, in his loss of power, finally in his murder. In power, Richard had been capricious and petty. Poetry came to him, he acquired a soul, when he lost his rule, when the "caterpillars of the commonwealth" deserted him and the "sick hour" came. And that is how Shawcross the dramatist in prose has presented the Shah. Indeed, it is Richard's lamentation on the cruel turn of fate that Shawcross selects as the epigraph for his book:

> Farewell, King!
> Cover your heads, and mock not flesh and blood
> With solemn reverence; throw away respect,
> Tradition, form and ceremonious duty;
> For you have but mistook me all this while.
> I live with bread like you, feel want,
> Taste grief, need friends; subjected thus,
> How can you say to me I am a king?

By the time we come to the end of Shawcross's narrative, to the end of the "forlorn journey into exile and death" through various ports of call (Egypt, Morocco, the Bahamas, Mexico, the United States, Panama, and finally back to Egypt), only the vindictive and the mean-spirited will be left remembering, or quibbling about, his brutal reign of little less than four decades. The woes of an ailing, old man, dying of cancer, are what we are given. During the 18-month journey, heads of state, former cronies of the Shah, people who had professed great esteem for him, who had done business with him, all fall away. He is fleeced by greedy men who overcharge him for rentals, for bodyguard expenses. He comes to worry about money. Through it all, he is stoic, philosophical, perhaps even a man like the "rest of us."

Shawcross has written a melodrama, a gripping one, which keeps us interested in its bizarre happenings, in the various settings that the Shah visits. It is easy to stick along for the ride. We love the gossip, the intrigue, the spectacle: a court in exile, the recollections of the Master of the Horse and of the Grand Master of Ceremonies, the scenes of monarchs and heads of state giving solemn assurances of support for the Shah and then walking away from the pledges they made, the warring medical teams (French, Panamanian, American, Egyptian, eight medical teams in all) feuding over turf, over compensation, over the right diagnosis of the Shah's illness. We stay with this story because we are voyeurs, because we love morbid tales, even as we proclaim our innocence and our high purpose.

It was never in the script, this last search for a home in such unlikely places as the Bahamas, Mexico, and Panama. If exile was to be his fate, the Shah thought, he could settle in America, or at least in a "mainstream" country like Austria or Switzerland. He did not want to end up, he said, in "some banana republic to which only pariahs were sent." The first port of call, Egypt, was the realm of a friendly ruler. An invitation came from Anwar Sadat as the Pahlavis were on their way out of the country. The Shah planned on spending a few

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days in Egypt on his way to the United States. Then, in Egypt, another invitation arrived from the King of Morocco. The "Commander of the Faithful," King Hassan II, had been an "old ally" of the Shah, another absolute ruler. "Would his Imperial Majesty the Shah be so good as to pause in Marrakesh on his way to the U.S.? He would." In Washington, Jimmy Carter and his aides were relieved. The Shah's arrival on their shores would be postponed.

"It was in Morocco," Shawcross writes, "that the twilight began to fall." First, there was a change of heart on the part of King Hassan. A month after the Shah's arrival in Morocco, the word was out that the Moroccan king wanted his guest out of his country. By then Khomeini had returned to Iran, and the shrewd Moroccan ruler knew that his guest was an embarrassment and a liability. The king pressed the Americans to take their ally off his hands. But an American decision had been made against the admission of the Shah to the United States. To the American ambassador in Morocco fell the task of telling the Shah that he would have to find refuge elsewhere.

Two countries, the Shah was told, were willing to receive him: Paraguay and South Africa. He did not want to go to Paraguay, the King of Kings said. As for South Africa, the place held sad memories and associations: the Shah's father had died there, a political exile. He would bow to the inevitable, though; he would go to South Africa if he had to. But hours before he was to depart, the work of his American supporters, David Rockefeller and Henry Kissinger, paid off. The Bahamas offered him a temporary haven. He took off for the Bahamas with his wife and a small entourage, aboard King Hassan's private 747: "Expelled by a cunning King, they flew again toward the West through a world that all the time was changing and shifting against them."

The stay in the Bahamas was expensive, even for a Persian autocrat: the ten weeks cost $1.2 million. The rented house, we are advised, was "tiny and open to the beach." The security problems were horrendous. There were journalists, autograph hunters, "other hucksters all over the beach." Queen Farah, searching for an explanation for the exile, for the loss of power, for the humid, cramped house, found an analogy in the tale of a French pastry chef who had prepared a magnificent cake for the famed Persepolis celebration in 1971, in the great old days when the Shah anointed himself the inheritor of the mantle of Cyrus the Great. When the cake was moved, it collapsed. And the chef was devastated. "All his work, his art, in crumbs. That is how I feel today. Everything we tried to create, all our work in crumbs."

For a brief while, in the Bahamas, the Shah came to hope that the British might offer him a home. Queen Elizabeth, he was told, was sympathetic to the idea. More important, Margaret Thatcher had made a promise, through an emissary, that she would grant asylum to the Shah if she were to come to power. When Thatcher was elected in May 1979, the Shah and his queen celebrated in the Bahamas. But the Iron Lady had second thoughts. Britain had interests in Iran; there was commerce to be carried out with that country; there were fears that the British Embassy would be seized. A British emissary was sent to Paradise Island: the deal was off. Her Majesty's government, though, wanted something from the Shah: "My government wants to be able to say that you accept and understand the decision not to grant you asylum," the emissary said. There was haggling over the language, and the emissary had to settle only for "accept."

DRAWING BY VINT LAWRENCE FOR THE NEW REPUBLIC

Mexico was next. The Bahamian visa had expired, and President José López Portillo had come through with an invitation. The setting in Cuernavaca was more dignified, at least, than the house in the Bahamas. Besides, Mexico was a better place for an exile with powerful American friends who were urging his admission to their own country. It was on the Mexican leg of the journey that the campaign of Rockefeller, Kissinger, and the "wise man" John McCloy was waged, and their war of nerves against the Carter administration finally won. Jimmy Carter backed down. He would admit the Shah, after all. Then the Shah's cancer—the secret he had been keeping for five years, the illness that French physicians had diagnosed—flared up. Carter's hand was forced by the deterioration of the Shah's health. And so, on October 23, 1979, the Shah arrived in New York for medical treatment. It would be a temporary stay, the American officials said, and it had no political implications. The Carter crowd hoped that the Iranian crowd would understand what America was doing.

The rest, as they say, is history. Two

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weeks after the Shah's arrival in the United States, the American Embassy in Tehran was seized by "student militants following the Imam's line." For his part, the Shah checked in at the New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center under the name "David Newsome." A CAT scan showed that he had gallstones and an enlarged spleen. Further tests, and an operation, revealed that the Shah had a more serious form of cancer than the one his French physicians had been treating for the preceding five years. The mighty came to his bedside: Kissinger and Rockefeller, Gianni Agnelli and Frank Sinatra. Sinatra invited the Shah to his home in Palm Springs. So did Barbara Walters. She came to do what she does for the rich and powerful.

BUT IT WAS again time for another move. It was tough for an embattled American president to host the Shah while he had a hostage crisis to contend with. The Iranian revolutionaries were filling the world's media with reports of the Shah's plunder and cruelty, reports that the American press was now willing to circulate, too. The ailing Shah's "spin control" didn't work. Carter wanted the Shah out of the country in a hurry. When Mexico refused to take him back, a Latin American caudillo, Omar Torrijos of Panama, came to the rescue.

The story was repeated in Panama, an interlude that lasted little more than three months: more rental properties, more complaints that the Shah was being gouged by his hosts. And this time there were worries that the Panamanians might double-cross the Shah and extradite him to Iran. They were the oddest of couples, the Panamanian strongman—a swaggerer and a drinker—and the stiff, austere Persian king. For the Panamanian strongman, the choice for the Shah (Señor Shah, Torrijos called him) was simple: he should ride a helicopter or a beautiful white horse into Persia and fall like a king on his sword.

A way out of Panama was offered by Sadat. Like the Shah, Sadat had come to think of the state as an extension of his own person. He would offer asylum to "his friend"; Egypt would honor its obligation to a man who had been helpful to Egypt when he had wealth to dispose of, when he was a power to reckon with. "I have done nothing for you," the Shah told his host. "You are the only one to accept me with dignity. The others whom I have helped have offered me no help in return. I cannot understand." Four months later, in late July 1980, the Shah died a slow and cruel death. Sadat again did it his way. The Shah was given a grand state funeral.

IN RETELLING this picaresque farce, Shawcross has written a peculiar kind of history. It is history through the eyes of deposed dictators. His sources—Queen Farah Diba, Jehan Sadat, Ardeshir Zahedi (the Shah's last ambassador to Washington), the American lobbyists and handlers who were in charge of the Shah during this last episode, the courtiers who knew the Shah—load the writer's dice. Here, for example, is the queen on her husband's state of mind before his death:

> During all this period everyone was complaining and my husband never, never complained, never said anything about anybody. Sometimes he would say "I don't understand why." But being angry, insulting people—never. In a way he had elevated himself so much above everything. I think he was a man of integrity, dignity. He was a civilized human being. And when you have suffered so much, seen so much, what is there to say?

As history, this is lamentable. Indeed, it is not history at all, it is myth. They are not reliable witnesses to history, these Iranian exiles recounting dubious and sentimental tales in villas overlooking the Mediterranean in France. They are great entertainers, to be sure, but only so long as they are not taken seriously, so long as their audience is not taken in by them. The testimony of Jehan Sadat declaring that she had seen the fall coming, that she had wanted to warn the Shah, back in 1976, that a revolution in Iran was in the making, that only her husband forbade her to do such a thing, is also best appreciated for what it is: another yarn. But we get no help, no critical examination of his evidence, from Shawcross. We are given these testimonies as serious sources, as serious claims. In dealing with his wily witnesses, Shawcross often seems thoroughly innocent and gullible. Either his informants ensnared him, or he himself came to the story very much wanting to believe.

Shawcross bills his book as an inquiry into the matter of "loyalty" between states. His journey with the Shah is a statement of his own belief, never fully articulated, that the Shah was owed an American haven. By this logic, friendly dictators are to be given an insurance policy that they can redeem when the fall comes—a secure place of exile, a promise of immunity, a ban on extradition. In reality, of course, no such absolute demonstration of American loyalty was owed the Shah. Carter had it right before he caved in to the pressure of the "Who lost Iran?" campaign. "Fuck the Shah," Carter had said wisely, in a moment of exasperation, when two in his inner circle, Vice President Walter Mondale and national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, urged the Shah's admission. Carter did not want the Shah, he said, to be "here playing tennis while Americans in Tehran were being kidnapped or even being killed." The same cold-blooded calculation that Thatcher made ought to have been made, and sustained, in arriving at an American policy on the matter of the Shah's asylum. There were American interests, too (for the short term, the embassy in Tehran; for the long term, the American position in post-revolutionary Iran and its region) that should have prevailed.

SHAWCROSS'S SENSE of where loyalty and obligation lay in this affair is misplaced. Worse, Shawcross has written the sort of book that raises the matter of his own loyalty, of his own objectivity as a writer. Why are the innocent victims of the Shah in Iran so much easier to overlook than the innocent victims of the Americans in Cambodia? Ten years ago Shawcross wrote the highly acclaimed *Sideshow*, a devastating criticism of Nixon's and Kissinger's policy in Cambodia. But the adversarial relationship to power that saw Shawcross through his Cambodian research has deserted him altogether. "My interest in Iran began in the 1960s," he writes. "Ardeshir Zahedi, the Shah's ambassador to London, became a firm friend of my family then, and has remained so since." Zahedi, the Shah's ambassador in Washington as the final drama of the Shah's collapse played itself out, was the son of Gen. Fazlollah Zahedi, an Iranian general, who played a pivotal role in the CIA-orchestrated coup of 1953 (Operation Ajax, it was called) that overthrew the government of Muhammad Mossadeq and restored the Shah to power. Zahedi the son, Shawcross's friend, later married the Shah's daughter (the marriage ended in divorce). Zahedi's politics were clear. To the bitter end in 1978-79, he urged the Shah to go to the brink, to risk civil war, to put down the revolt against the throne.

Shawcross's relationship to Zahedi be-

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gan, presumably, as a family affair. Shawcross's father, we are also told in the acknowledgments, was president of the Iran Society in Britain.

AN ORIENTAL court has its ways. Its charm pulls in almost all who come within its orbit. And so Shawcross's credulity is not limited to his family's friends. He is attentive, too, to the moods of Princess Ashraf, the Shah's twin sister, the "Dragon Lady" of the regime, a woman known for her enormous corruption and for her cruelty. Here is Shawcross on Princess Ashraf after the fall, and the death of her brother:

> Throughout, she dressed in mourning for her brother, eschewing society, saying "why pretend to gaiety when your heart is bleeding?" She lived a lonely life, spending much of the day in bed, often rising only in the afternoon for a massage. . . . Ashraf established the Foundation for Iranian Studies in Washington. This was intended to help keep Iranian culture and history alive among a few of the million or so Iranians now in exile.

After all that we know now of that court and that family, Shawcross gives us a princess obsessed with culture!

A terrible new world of cruelty and carnage came to Iran in the aftermath of the Shah's fall, cruelty beyond what the Pahlavis visited on that unfortunate land. But this neither exonerates the ancien régime of its own record, nor does it turn the recollections of that regime's exiled courtiers into credible historical material. In his research on Cambodia, in his pursuit of Henry Kissinger, Shawcross's skepticism and indignation were relentless. He knew, in *Sideshow*, that power dissimulates. He had unkind words for the members of his guild, like the Kalb brothers, for the sycophantic way they reported on Kissinger, and for Joseph Kraft and Joseph Alsop, who functioned, he claimed, as "bridges" for Kissinger. His Iranian chronicle, however, is Kissinger's revenge. We have come full circle: Shawcross has written the sort of book that Kissinger would approve of, a book that makes more of the loyalty owed a monarch-on-the-run than of the ways of the monarch when he ruled.

FOUAD AJAMI

Fouad Ajami is the Majid Khadduri Professor at the School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University. His most recent book (with Eli Reed) is *Beirut: City of Regrets* (W. W. Norton).

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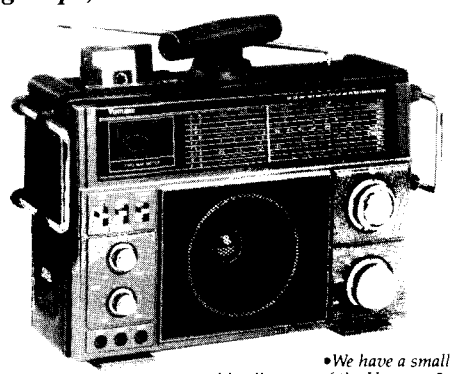

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Reds, Whites, And Blues

The Life of Langston Hughes Volume I, 1902-1941: I, Too, Sing America by Arnold Rampersad

(Oxford University Press, 468 pp., $9.95 paper)

Volume II, 1941-1967: I Dream a World by Arnold Rampersad

(Oxford University Press, 512 pp., $24.95)

The first volume of Arnold Rampersad's biography of Langston Hughes ends in 1941, with Hughes painfully recovering in a California hospital from an "unspeakable illness" (it was gonorrhea). He was on one of the bottom sides of his up-and-down career, evicted from his Harlem apartment (his subtenants had neglected to pay the rent) and dogged by the right-wing press, and by publicity-seeking politicians, for his alleged Communist Party ties. As proof, his persecutors kept citing a notorious poem, "Goodbye Christ," that he had dashed off in Moscow nine years earlier, in which the Christ co-opted by "Kings, generals, robbers, and killers" is asked to make way for "A real guy named / Marx Communist Lenin Peasant Stalin Worker ME." In vain Hughes insisted that he never was a Communist, that his target had been corrupt religion, not Christ himself. The press repeated its calumnies; and his radical pals chewed him up for knuckling under to the reactionaries. It would take another 15 years of compromise and accommodation before he was allowed, in Rampersad's words, "to survive on acceptable terms as a writer and continue his lifelong service as an artist to his race."

The second volume of Arnold Rampersad's biography of Langston Hughes exhibits the virtues of his first; that is to say, it is rich in detail, consistently intelligent, stylishly written, and full of acute observations about the mind, the times, and the work of Langston Hughes. If it seems less intrinsically interesting than its predecessor, that is because only a few events in the second half of Hughes's life match in intensity and excitement the extraordinary episodes of his formative years: young Langston's traumatic interactions with his Negro-hating father and his self-absorbed, histrionic mother; the day in a Kansas church when he waited for the infusion of Christ's abiding grace and faked a conversion; the "grand tour" of Africa as a mess boy on a freighter followed by his down-and-out days in Paris; his rapturous immersion in the Harlem scene and his part in its "renaissance"; his term of gilded bondage to a spooky white patron or "Godmother," as she wanted to be called, shrewd, benevolent, tyrannical, and wrapped in her mystique of black primitivism; his collaboration and irreparable rift with Zora Neale Hurston; his euphoric sojourn in the Soviet Union in 1931; his journalistic stint in Republican Spain six years later.

These are the bare bones of the biographical narrative about the adventures and misadventures of a writer, spiritual cousin of Peter Pan and Augie March, whose immediate forebears on his mother's side had been distinguished black leaders. The bloodstained shawl of his grandmother's first husband, killed at Harper's Ferry, was a family relic, and the child's elders never let him forget his sacred obligation to "The Race." As Rampersad tells it, there was something almost providential in the fateful interventions of white and black associates at certain critical junctures of Hughes's career, in the overcoming of his doubts and hesitations before giving himself totally to Afro-America.

The 13-year-old boy, receptive to the sermons and gospel music he heard in a black church, waited for the flashing illumination of Christ, but had to fake the conversion that never came. The talented Harlem poet gratefully accepted the help of Carl Van Vechten and the even more disinterested support of a rich Californian. For a time he submitted to the gilded bondage of his "Godmother." When he broke with her, an act of redemptive rebellion, he went into shock. But he could not resist the pull of his vocation: to be a poet bonded to his people, speaking for them and to them, drawing sustenance from them.

The making of the race poet is the central theme in *I, Too, Sing America*. A lonely, reserved boy escapes through books into fantasy. He acquires a facility with words, takes what he needs from his literary models (Sandburg, Whitman, Du Bois, McKay, among others) without being overwhelmed by them. Gradually he comes to sound like nobody but himself. An original note can be heard in a high school poem about one Susanna Jones, whose face, when she is dressed in red, is "like an ancient cameo / Turned brown by the ages. / Come with a blast of trumpets, / Jesus!" Thoughts on black antiquity also inform one of his most quoted poems, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (a response, Rampersad believes, to his father's contempt for "niggers" and poets), which equates his own soul with the primordial rivers of the world. The best of the poems that follow register deeply felt emotions unspoiled by artifice or bombast; the least satisfactory are likely to be throbbing hymns to blackness or truculent political declarations no better or worse than much of the protest poetry published in the '20s or '30s.

Hughes reached his apogee, Rampersad persuasively argues, with *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927), "his most brilliant book of poems, and one of the more astonishing books ever published in the United States—comparable in the black world to *Leaves of Grass* in the white." It also got a comparable reception. The title, lifted from one of the lesser poems in the volume ("When hard luck overtakes you / Nothin' you can do / Gather up yo' fine clothes / An' sell 'em to de Jew"), was misunderstood (Hughes was an unequivocal philosemite); and reviewers in the black press pronounced *Fine Clothes* disgusting and degenerate, "reeking of the gutter and sewer."

To be misunderstood is not invariably a sign of greatness, but in this instance the blinkered critics were too deeply offended by unseemly vignettes of the black underclass to recognize a literary event. A radical language experiment, a kind of sustained blues akin in mood and tone to the grieving songs of Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday, *Fine Clothes* marked the author's deepest penetration of black culture. One has only to compare its chants of misery with his fine poem "The Weary Blues," written in 1920, to notice a shift in perspective. In

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the latter, Hughes had artfully linked "the lowly blues to formal poetry" and yet seemed somehow remote from the singer in the poem. The poet seems almost a voyeur; he says he "heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan." By 1927, however, he had become his performers, was privy to their secrets, their sense of loss and pain and desolation. Seldom thereafter, even in *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1957) and *Ask Your Momma* (1961), was Hughes able to project these intangible feelings so unaffectedly and at such a pitch of concentration.

I Dream a World opens with Hughes once again breasting the current of history, but not making much headway. War is about to break. The cold war lies beyond, and thereafter the civil rights movement. He crisscrosses the country, lecturing to black students, visiting friends. He publishes volumes of poetry and fiction, edits anthologies, writes plays, operas, songs, always hoping for the big success that never comes. He surfaces, sinks, resurfaces. Only eventually would he arrive in calmer waters, still not rich, but respected and honored by an international audience.

In 1941, however, such recognition was a distant prospect. Hughes had no such expectations. A battered and self-described "literary sharecropper," made wary by adversity, in 1941 Hughes began his slow waltz (to use Rampersad's figure) "from the embrace of the left." The fellow traveler had no quarrel with the Soviet Union, and he could never expunge the memory of his joy on entering a country where racism was officially proscribed. But when his political ties threatened his livelihood, he decided the time had come to withdraw unobtrusively from suspect organizations labeled "un-American" by the right wing. As he remarked later, "Trying to run a major career on a minor income is something." This capitulation, which entailed self-censorship and reneging on old friendships, did not prevent his being hauled up before the McCarthy committee in the next decade. Appearing as a "cooperating witness," he denied that he had ever been a communist or an atheist, affirmed his patriotism, and disarmingly retracted the sentiments of his radical juvenilia. Hughes got through the patronizing interrogation without having to grovel or name names, but as Rampersad says, he had nonetheless "surrendered," however "honorably," and the humiliation rankled.

DRAWING BY VINT LAWRENCE FOR THE NEW REPUBLIC

Hughes joined the war effort, and contributed his share of patriotic doggerel to whip up black enthusiasm for the anti-fascist cause, but this did not silence his denunciations of the ubiquitous Jim Crow. His concession to political orthodoxy was tactical, not ideological. It was undertaken to keep the loyalty of a black constituency that had never warmed to his Marxist and anti-church rhetoric. A radicalism is detectable in his writing then and later, as the savage and mournful verse in the posthumously published *The Panther and the Lash* attests. For Hughes, racial issues had always superseded politics, or at least subsumed it. The stories, poems, and plays that he wrote during and after the war are shot through with sardonic and despairing comments on the disparity between the national cant about freedom and the squalid reality that belied it. On the day that Berlin fell, he found himself riding across Oklahoma aboard a Jim Crow car segregated from the celebrations of his fellow Americans.

Hughes hadn't entirely abandoned what he called "the dream deferred," a Whitmanesque version of "spiraling upward and outward toward a freer, fuller life for all," but persisting racism and black anger chilled his hopes. He caught, Rampersad writes, "the unmistakable sounds of cultural change" in the black music floating out of Harlem's bars in the late '40s. Swing, with its "sweetened, whitened strains," was being displaced by "'be-bop' jazz," traditional lyrics by nonsense language. To Hughes's sensitive ear, these changes denoted "the growing fissures in Afro-American culture, the myth of integration and American social harmony jarred by a message of deep discord."

At about this time, in 1948, Hughes bought a house in Harlem, his first and only permanent residence. He had finally come home, after his literal and metaphorical peregrinations. From his early youth he had been haunted by his ancestral links with the white community (personified by white great-grandfathers on both sides of his family) that had denied kinship to him and his distinguished black forebears, the theme of two of his best-known poems, "The Cross" and "Mulatto," and of his powerful story "Fathers and Sons." The prophet of negritude (and so recognized by his African literary confreres) was fascinated by the blurring of racial boundaries, by the ambiguities and ironies of "passing." But drawn as he was

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to white friends and patrons, and notwithstanding the happy interludes he spent in white company, it was Harlem, the bastion of blackness, where he came to feel most at ease. His decision to plant himself there could be read as a declaration of fealty to the black part of his divided heritage.

"Harlem" already signified for Hughes what "Manahatta" had meant to Whitman. It was both a place and a poetic invention, a promiscuous urban scene where one could be alone in and part of the crowd, a compost heap that fertilized his imagination. Hughes, the good brown literatus, relished its noisy streets, the jukes and the bars, the music, "not at all abashed" (as Whitman might say) by pimps, prostitutes, and drunks, and comfortable as well as respectable hard-working Harlemites. This mélange of emotions about Harlem and its inhabitants he incarnated in his incomparable Jesse B. Semple—Simple to his friends—whom many of Hughes's admirers consider not only his most striking creation, but also a folk hero of immense social and literary importance.

Rampersad's pages about the Simple books are among the best in his work. He shows how the character that Hughes casually introduced into his Chicago *Defender* column in 1943 as "My Simple Minded Friend" gradually exfoliated into a distinctive person and eponym, into an authentic black voice. Boyd, the narrator of the Simple sketches, is educated, a bit on the prim side, and starchy in his locutions like the straight man in a minstrel show, but he is also Simple's friend and confidant. He pays for his beer and sympathizes with his grievances, even though, unlike his larky bar companion, he has internalized a strain of the white middle-class ethic. Together, as Rampersad observes, they equal Langston Hughes, or as Hughes himself puts it, "myself talking to me. Or else talking to myself."

But it is Simple who wins out in the contest between Hughes's black rebellious side and his passive, liberal, white alter ego, Simple who blurts out opinions far more subversive than the revolutionary clichés that Hughes published in the radical press—dark thoughts about perdurable prejudice, racial mixing, even daydreams about the destruction of the white race. And although Boyd chides him for making blanket indictments (after all, Simple knows there are many fine white people, and he loves Mrs. Roosevelt), Simple usually gets the last word. "You are the most *un-Negro* Negro I know," Simple tells Boyd. "You ought to be a race leader. White folks would love you." Boyd replies, "I'm only trying to look on both sides of the question." "To do which," counters Simple, "you have to straddle *both* sides of the fence. Me, I stand on one side and look on the other—and all I see over there is white. On my side, is me. Sitting on the fence is you." "I didn't build the fence," Boyd answers. "Then tear it down," says Simple.

IN IDENTIFYING himself with Simple, Hughes was continuing his long serio-comic feud with the black bourgeoisie, among whom were the men and the women who had brought him to notice, and who continued to regard him as a beloved, if erring, son. Accused in the 1920s of writing "gutter" poetry that confirmed in white minds the stereotype of the primitive, lawless "nigger," Hughes had replied for himself and the "Niggerati" (Zora Neale Hurston's designation for his rebellious coterie) in a rhapsodic manifesto: "We younger Negro artists who write now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. . . . If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either."

Thirty years later, however, it did matter. The portrayal of blacks as murderous crazies by writers of the next generation deeply distressed Hughes. He was particularly critical of Richard Wright, whom he blamed for setting the ugly pattern, and of Wright's literary heirs, who simply substituted "modern stereotypes" for old ones. Out of allegiance to his fellow writers, Hughes at first refrained from attacking them in print. He had come of age at a time when the black intellectual elite frowned upon rudeness and vulgarity, and he rather fancied a touch of lawlessness and iconoclasm. What stuck in his craw were the "foulmouthed militants," the distorters of "the Negro image." And he singled out for special scorn the black writer who adopted "the confessional approach to literature," indulged in self-pity, resorted to profanity and "near pornography," and exploited white guilt on his "lonely crusade towards the best seller lists."

These reproofs of his juniors, Rampersad notes, were not entirely disinterested. Hughes was envious of their financial and popular success. He was troubled and puzzled by the acclaim given to *Invisible Man* and *Go Tell It on the*

PERSPECTIVE

The view from the air belongs to no one.
Those silences and fractious parklands
constantly retreat from one another
like ordinary people desperate for privacy.
The view from the air is of wounded lions,
of an intimacy God will not share,
the grilles and trellises of every death
uncommunicated in a big country.

Happiness divides us, sometimes
in God's name, sometimes in the name of History.
I could be happy now. From my seat in the airplane
I could imagine the full enclosures of people
contented and with no needs beyond
private moments walking the fenceline
before joining the others in the night enclosure
that is the final shape of countries.

I could be happy tomorrow. I could see myself
out in the dark all night and in the morning
standing upright beyond the fenceline,
seeing for myself the land has no shape
and is spotted with lions dying ignorant
of the airplanes overhead.
I would be happy because of the justice
that every death belongs to lions and has no
country.

The grilles and trellises of the view from the air,
windows cut into a hundred pictures,
ladders of huge flowers disappearing,
make me think there is no such place as the world.
The wisdom of God kills lions.
The undirected freedoms of History
kill lions. And there is a happiness in me
that cannot live on the ground or save my country.

DONALD REVELL

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Mountain, which seemed to him pretentious and overwritten, and he showed little awareness of the motives and the compulsions that fathered them. Once Lawrence had shaken him up, and he couldn't entirely escape the influence of Eliot and Joyce, but he thought of himself primarily as an entertainer of and a spokesman for his race, not as an intellectual. He made no effort to read and study the literary gods of the moderns. Not surprisingly, Baldwin and other like-minded writers treated him as a black chauvinist and a gifted has-been who had "stopped thinking."

RAMPERSAD monitors the running debate rather than plumping for either side. Without committing the biographer's unpardonable sin of selling out his client, he concedes that Hughes did fritter away his energies on minor tasks, and took on too many assignments in his search of the fame and the cash so long denied him. He quotes without comment Ralph Ellison's assertion that Hughes was "incapable of sustained labor on a single, epic enterprise." But he rejects Baldwin's ultimate put-down: that Hughes never managed to reconcile his "social and artistic responsibilities." To write for and about the unsophisticated, to explore the folk mind, requires real artistic skills, and is not inconsistent with writing professionally. Hughes urged black writers to be writers first, colored second, "even while dealing with racial material." But he added the significant caveat that this objective was unattainable without "a deep confidence in blacks and love of them." For Rampersad, Hughes was "one of the few black writers of any consequence to champion racial consciousness as a source of inspiration for black artists."

The concept of negritude or "soul" (as Hughes preferred to call it) was very much in the minds of black intellectuals in the '60s and '70s. Still, the militants were not about to canonize a writer who, regardless of his previous services to colored peoples in America and abroad, invidiously contrasted the credo of the ultranationalists with genuine pride and love of race. All his life Hughes had condemned the extremes of black and white chauvinism, pondered the pros and cons of integration, and distrusted the optimism of the integrationists, black and white. Yet he had always felt comfortable with his white friends, and never quite relinquished the Whitman-inspired vision of harmonious heteroge-

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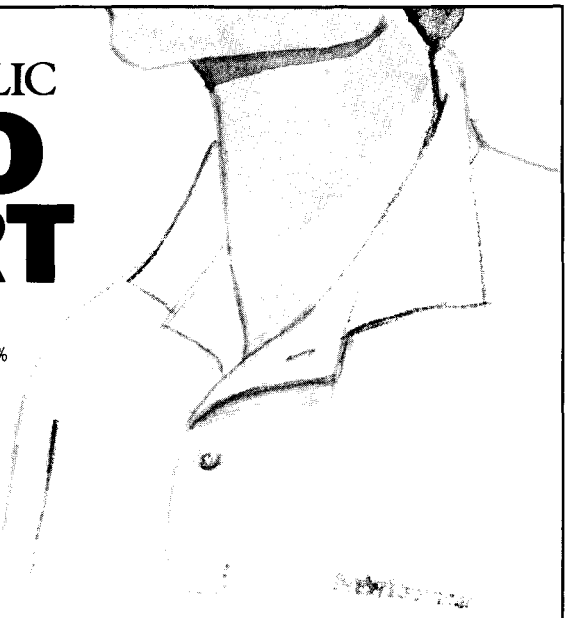

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neity. The split between the followers of Malcolm X and the protagonists of nonviolence disheartened Hughes, because he could identify himself with both parties. Lacking either the will or the energy to throw himself actively into the struggles of the Freedom Fighters now agitating the South, he compromised by dedicating his gospel musical, *Jericho-Jim Crow*, to the young who marched and picketed and petitioned "to help make a better America for all, and especially for citizens of color."

In 1966 Hughes presaged his own withdrawal when he dispatched Jesse B. Semple and his wife, Joyce, to the suburbs (a kind of living death for the Harlem denizen who said he preferred wild men to wild animals and neon signs over bars to nature's sunsets) and brought his series to a close. Savoring his honors, Hughes continued to lecture and to publish practically to the moment of his death in the following year. The country was at war, and there was no joy in Harlem. At his funeral, his friends arranged a jazz concert that ended with the playing of Duke Ellington's "Do Nothing Till You Hear from Me."

WITH THE completion of this admirable biography, it is possible to get a handle on this elusive figure, who repelled intimacy and remained a puzzle even to his closest friends. Rampersad's Hughes is a worldly wise innocent, a cunning naïf, eager for praise and affection but guarding his privacy, secretive about his sexual habits, drawn to mother and father surrogates. He thinks a good deal about food and is "a veteran at accepting hospitality." (One can get along in the world, he advises young Ralph Ellison, by being nice to people and letting them pay for your meals.) Neither hero nor saint, he can be impulsive (decreasingly so with age), courageous, affable, mischievous, disingenuous, occasionally unfeeling and malicious, and, thanks to many blows and rejections, something of a cynic and fatalist. "Maybe you might be soft outside," he writes in his journal, "but you got to be hard inside." He is tempered, rather than twisted, by the humiliations he swallowed at considerable emotional cost.

Rampersad's study contains a few slips (Mary McCarthy will be surprised to find herself and Dwight MacDonald listed with Lillian Hellman and other "illustrious leftists" whose presence at the noisy 1949 Waldorf Astoria "peace" gathering offset the "few well-known anti-communists" who heckled the sessions). And specialists will disagree with, or wish to qualify, some of Rampersad's judgments on Hughes and his contemporaries—his portrait of Alain Locke as a feline and self-serving conniver, for example; or his treatment of the Hughes-Hurston imbroglio (slightly slanted in the former's favor) over the disputed authorship of a play; or the way he handles the issue of Hughes's ambiguous sexuality.

Does it really matter whether Hughes was asexual, heterosexual, homosexual? To the biographer, it must matter. Rampersad scrupulously reports the surmises of Hughes's friends and acquaintances, and decides, given the want of concrete evidence, that the question must remain forever moot. Perhaps so, but Rampersad's bemused accounts of Hughes scrambling to discourage marriage-minded women, and the examples he provides of his bland evasiveness and reticence about his personal affairs, offer hints of unexplored answers.

Indeed, Rampersad is a little evasive himself when it comes to "explaining" Langston Hughes, the man and the writer. What he thinks about him remains implicit in what Hughes says and does. Rampersad leaves it pretty much up to the reader to draw his own conclusions. He adroitly blends Hughes's varied writings into the biographical narrative, but he attempts only sparingly to probe them for clues to the secret man. He fully records how the writings were received decade by decade, but holds back in his assessment of Hughes as a man of letters. Often illuminating in his readings of single poems, and in his analyses of the small body of Hughes's most original and finished work, Rampersad is sometimes not miserly enough in his use of superlatives, and he is too noncommittal on the stream of slack verse that Hughes turned out so effortlessly.

Such reservations count for little, however, when measured against Rampersad's achievement. He may not have penetrated Hughes's core of secrecy, but he comes closer than anybody else to making sense of a very complicated personality and an unusual literary talent. And he shows, unintentionally, how oblivious most white readers still are to the history, to the social and cultural geography, of black society in the United States. Written without stridency or partisanship, this life of Langston Hughes (and this is not the least of its many distinctions) illustrates once again how American Afro-American literature really is, and why it is both illogical and misleading to treat it as if it existed in some alien and exotic dimension far away from our own.

DANIEL AARON

Daniel Aaron is professor emeritus of English at Harvard University.

YADA YADA YADA

Story of My Life
by Jay McInerney

(Atlantic Monthly Press, 189 pp., $16.95)

Beware of a novel built upon a catchphrase. A flip curl eventually loses its hold. "Story of my life," toss-away phrase for a toss-away life, is the signature curl of Alison Poole, postmodern boy-toy by night, aspiring actress by day. "Acting is the first thing that's made me get up in the morning. The first year I was in New York I didn't do anything but guys and blow. Staying out all night at the Surf Club and Zulu, waking up at five in the afternoon with plugged sinuses and sticky hair. Some kind of white stuff in every opening. Story of my life." So it, like, fries Alison's bacon that her much-divorced Daddy would rather encourage his latest squeeze than fork over money for her drama school tuition. "He actually believes her when she says she's writing a novel but when I want to spend eight hours a day busting ass at Lee Strasberg's it's like, *another one of Alison's crazy ideas*. Story of my life."

Acting class is about Alison's speed because it showcases her exhibitionism (she boasts in one class about a blowjob she gave that morning) and doesn't bother the Do Not Disturb sign tacked to her brow. It allows her to be her: a hysterical airhead. Alison can only han-

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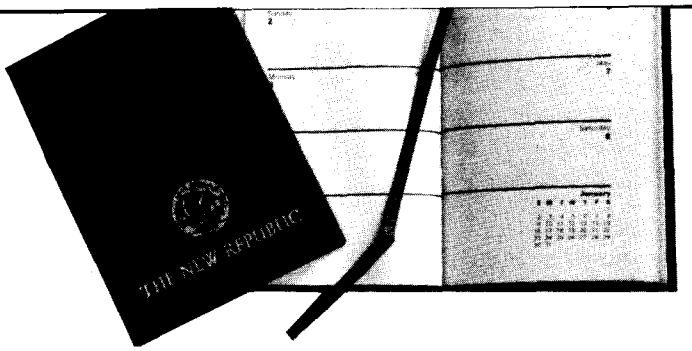
dle a soft curriculum. "[W]hat were the two things that you were never supposed to mix in chemistry class or you'd like blow up the whole school? Not oil and water—something else. So much for my education. Blanks that never got filled in. None of the above. Story of my life." Her friends are blank capsules who hiphop like jumping beans. "Story of Skip's life, trading commodities." "She said she's totally in lust, she'd met a great new guy. Story of her life."

Story of my life. Totally in lust. Can't rape the willing. Shivering wreck. Legend in his own mind. Give me a break. Yada yada yada. Unhappy unit. *Story of My Life* becomes a daisy chain of catchphrases. "Story of my life, right? . . . But then I remember my little problem, which makes me a mondo unhappy unit." All talk, no texture, Jay McInerney's third novel speaks in Valley Girl lingo spread with a thick crudola of New York chutzpah. Nerviness and spaciness cross voltage behind spiked eyeballs.

STYLISTICALLY McInerney is walking a swinging tightrope. Novels written entirely in pop idiom seldom succeed, not only because idiom changes (today's trendy expression is tomorrow's corny antique: "pour me a cup of java," said the beatnik to the bearded lady), but because non-stop hipness is too narrow a mode for the full spectrum of human feeling. All-talk novels, from Andy Warhol's *a* to Bret Easton Ellis's *The Rules of Attraction*, are narrow bands of static, nigh on unreadable. Even Norman Mailer, one of McInerney's heroes, couldn't sustain the pop braggadocio with his Texas stud narrator swinging his dong in *Why Are We in Vietnam?* The novel became a no-exit language machine, an orgone box of pun and hyperbole.

McInerney does make a game try. The early pages of *Story of My Life* have a snazzy rhythm and snotty attack. Take Alison's friend Didi, for example. "If Didi made a list of her favorite things I guess cocaine would be at the top and sunlight wouldn't even make the cut." Or take Skip in commodities, still mooning after his college sweetheart. "And I'm like, give me a break, Skip. Give yourself a break. This is ten years after. This is nineteen eighty-whatever." In a daze of drugs and shrinking daylight, Alison grazes at in-spots that already seem passé (Nell's, for instance) and grills herself brown at the tanning salon. But mostly she talks trash. Alison's tele-



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phone line is her intravenous tube. Much of the novel consists of telephone calls—

> So of course the phone rings. A guy's voice, Barry something, says, may I speak to Alison Poole?
>
> And I'm like, you're doing it.
>
> I'm a friend of Skip's, he says.
>
> I go, if this is some kind of joke I'm like really not amused.
>
> Hey, no joke, he goes. I'm just, you know, Skip told me you guys weren't going out anymore and I saw you once at Indochine and I thought maybe we could dinner sometime.
>
> I'm like, I don't believe this. What am I?—the York Avenue Escort Service?
>
> I go, did Skip also tell you about the disease he gave me? That shrinks this Barry's equipment pretty quick. Suddenly he's got a call on his other line. Sure you do.

—and answering messages. "I call Dean again and get his machine. Story of my life." Alison herself seems to have a brain equipped with call-waiting. Every new thought makes an interruptive [click].

McInerney has a flair for flash intros. He illuminates Alison's circle of coke-whore friends with a strobe light, its pulsations catching the ghostly ruin beneath their glamour. He also has an ear for how cunty-mouthed a coke whore like Alison sounds: "Alex was really pissed when I read in *Vogue* or somewhere that there's like twelve hundred calories or something like that in an average load of come. Because at the time I was kind of anorexic and the last thing I was looking for was a way to swallow an extra thousand-plus calories." Sex for Alison's circle is a competitive ranking; one of her gal pals records all of their bedmates on a computer file, compiling data on length, width, position, duration.

Since this band of narcissists thinks the world pivots on their pelvises, every setback is shrilly inflated to global status. Pregnant, Alison throws herself a pity party. "And I don't have a nickel to my name, I owe everybody in the western hemisphere, I'm like a fucking Third World country—empty treasury, exploding birth rate. Jesus." (Earlier in the novel she had lied about an abortion to pry money out of a former beau for her portion of the rent.) Ironic that McInerney recently told *New York* magazine, "I'm too young to be a one-note kind of guy when I have a more symphonic mind." *Story of My Life* is only alive when its sticks to its bitchy note of petulance. Beyond that, it's a writing exercise.

SYMPHONIC MIND or not, so far McInerney hasn't demonstrated the dramatic amplitude or organizational skills to be a novelist. His specialty is the smart-ass monologue. Brief as it is, *Story of My Life* feels force-fed, crammed with familiar junk. "Jeannie's in a real pissy mood and gets right on the phone to her fiancé, so I watch 'Wheel of Fortune' in the bedroom. When she's finally finished . . . she hangs up and calls the deli to order some Diet Coke and a large bag of barbecue potato chips and a pack of Merit Ultra Lights." For variety from all this zoning out and pigging out in front of the TV, we're taken on a needless tour of midtown Manhattan, where Alison pukes at the observation deck of the Empire State Building and purchases a four-pack of vibrators at a porn shop. McInerney even pads the book with oft-told jokes, including the one about Pia Zadora starring in a production of *The Diary of Anne Frank*. (Punchline: "She's in the attic!") He resorts to these stale tricks with the desperation of a host whose dinner party is dying. Losing his cool to flopsweat, he really begins to reach. "I remember I read somewhere that outlaw guy John Dillinger had one that was about a foot and a half long and it's preserved in the Smithsonian or someplace. Now that's what I call the Washington Monument." Waiter—check, please!

Undoing the novel even more than its patchy construction are its banal psychologizing and sappy sense of woe. As *Bright Lights, Big City* and *Ransom* showed, beneath McInerney's roomy Armani suits beats the ♥-shaped pillow of a blatant sentimentalist. His humor is a cover for heartbreak. It's bad enough in small doses, as when Alison heads uptown to a crackhouse and the vials pop under her feet, "breaking like little promises." And when a crack dealer named Mannie, an exploited ethnic literally outclassed by his white customers, leaps suicidally from a sixth-story window, the message is even heavier: the fall of man, no less. (Mannie, geddit?)

Alison later makes a totally out-of-character visit to Mannie in the hospital only so *Story of My Life* can survey man's fallen state. It's a state of grace, as Mannie stares like a Moonie into space, emancipated from his chain of pain. "The thing is, he looks happy, which is more than you can say for the rest of us." Mannie is sacrificed to illustrate the posh vacuum of Alison's privileged upbringing. Early in the novel Alison's friends mockingly allude to Elvis Costello's song "Alison," and McInerney seems to have keyed his characterization from the lyric, "Alison, I know this world is killing you." For unlike Mannie, his Alison's a-hurting inside. She's sorrowful empty.

STRIPPED OF its sequins and sticky residue, *Story of My Life* is basically another money-can't-buy-love tale of a poor little rich girl who's been given anything but parental affection. Mommy is a lush, Daddy is a lech. But her heart belongs to Daddy. ". . . I sort of fantasize that he'll pick up the phone some day and say, is that you, Alison?" Shameless, McInerney even plants a "Rosebud" clue to Alison's disaffection, a horse she adored as a child named Dangerous Dan, which her father had killed for the insurance. Denied Daddy's care, she's doomed to hagdom. So young, so used-up: "Ten days from now I'll be twenty-one. It seems like I've been on the planet a lot longer than that." To keep this cornball crying jag going, McInerney strings the reader along by having Alison ask acquaintances what the three biggest lies are. One is, the check's in the mail, two is, I won't come in your mouth, but what's the third? She can't recall. I'm usually hopeless at guessing games, but even I was able to figure out what the third lie was, and sure enough, in the book's final pages, the payoff: "The third lie is, I love you."

No, the third biggest lie is, "Jay, those critics are just jealous!" In retrospect, lucky timing landed a windfall for *Bright Lights, Big City*. It caught the last tailwind of the downtown club scene before tired trendies began settling in as sofa spuds in front of their VCRs. (By the time the movie version starring Michael J. Fox was released, it had no electric scene to plug into.) And McInerney's sarcastic exposure of the workings of the *New Yorker*'s fact-checking department in *Bright Lights* came at a time when the *New Yorker* was still envisioned as a bloodless Henry James arena of sacred hush and elaborate fuss, where enormous qualms were suspended like raindrops from church cobwebs. Now that

CORRECTION

Richard Taruskin's review of *Music in Fascist Italy* by Harvey Sachs (TNR, September 5), contained a typographical error. The famous slap given Toscanini by a fascist occurred in 1931, not 1941.

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William Shawn no longer mystically ministers the magazine's business with his special dematerializing touch, it's a more pedestrian place.

In E. J. Kahn's chatty diary of 1987 at the *New Yorker* (*Year of Change*, Viking, $19.95), there's a revealing swipe at McInerney: "From London, a copy of a Jay McInerney piece in the Sunday *Times* about the *New Yorker*. Its title is 'Goodbye, Mr. Shawn.' McInerney was fired from Shawn's magazine for being a lousy checker, and his article presents evidence of why that was a good idea: 'And somewhere in the mind of every young man or woman who has ever sent a short story or résumé to the shabby offices on West 43rd Street was the knowledge that J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* had first appeared in these pages.' 'Twould have been nice if it had, but it hadn't."

Revealing, because *Story of My Life* is also a misplaced homage to Salinger. *Bright Lights, Big City* was so often compared to *Catcher in the Rye* that McInerney seems to have thought it incumbent to end *Story of My Life* in a way that acknowledges the Salingeresque debt. (*Catcher in the Rye* is also one of the few vernacular novels that *has* lasted.) Where Holden Caufield ends up in some sort of hospital under a shrink's supervision, Alison crashes in some clinic in Minnesota where she has white dreams while under sedation. Horses appear in both of their memories as emblems of childhood reverie. Like Holden, Alison is suspended on the cusp of adulthood, mentally bandaged from trauma. But Salingeresque innocence can't be faked, even by Salinger himself (as his polishing of the coy precocities of the Glass family proved). Where Holden seemed genuinely lost, Alison seems artificially adrift. For McInerney not only sentimentalizes, he moralizes. He's the one who signs her in for treatment. Alison Must Pay for Her Partying. That's why she's in the clinic: she's the symbol of misspent youth. Miss Selfish Cokehead nineteen eighty-whatever.

BUT THE influence of Salinger goes deeper than McInerney's manhandling of his heroine. *Story of My Life* finds McInerney seeking a literary role model to keep him righteous, a great white father in whose moccasins he can walk. In interviews he broods about the fate of being a burnout, a literary lush like Fitzgerald or Capote, and in his new novel he douses one of these hollow men with pissy scorn. On Kentucky Derby day, Alison's boyfriend Dean wagers on a horse named . . . Capote. But Capote can't handle the far turn. After the race, "Dean comes over and goes, I guess it was pretty stupid to think a horse named Capote could go the distance. He says, it's a case of sport imitating life—brilliant start, pathetic finish." *Brilliant start, pathetic finish* is the epitaph that McInerney fears after the fast start of *Bright Lights, Big City*. Careermanship is the true anxiety bedeviling *Story of My Life*. So to woo the gods who safekeep literary health and longevity, McInerney sticks a pin into Capote's puffy effigy (black magic) and lights a stick of incense at the shrine of Salinger (white magic).

But one could argue that the biggest hex on McInerney is his own bad judgment. Case in point: littering the streets and supermarkets of Manhattan this fall are stacks of catalogs for the Learning Annex, a singles mingles "meet market" that offers phony-baloney adult education courses in wine tasting, white collar boxing, the healing power of crystals, etc. On the back cover of the latest catalog is a full-page notice trumpeting a one-night seminar titled "How to Write and Get Anything Published—With Jay McInerney." The course description is priceless. "Heralded as the 'Salinger of the 80's,' applauded by critics as the new wry and passionate spokesman for the upwardly-mobile generation, McInerney stepped out from his lonely 1-typewriter world onto the golden alter [sic] of publishing success." Step right up to the tent, ladies and gentleman. "Spend an evening with this literary phenomenon and find out how he made it to the top, how he continues to stay there, and how you can too."

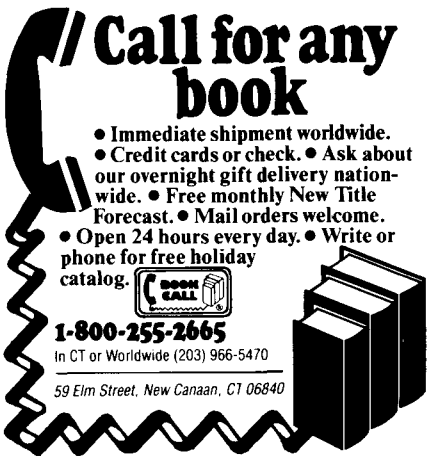
Even in his cups Truman Capote never sank this low. For all his authorial airs, McInerney has cheesy instincts. He can't be doing the Learning Annex gig because he needs the money; it's instant feedback he's after, quickie acclaim. He's slumming after fame. No wonder *Story of My Life* reads as if it were written for and about groupies. That's his constituency. In *Story of My Life*, Jaybird is giving his fans their fill. But such slim pickings! Mere crumbs scattered along the golden "alter." Like totally not enough.

JAMES WOLCOTT

James Wolcott writes regularly for *Texas Monthly* and *Vanity Fair*.

TRB, *from page 4*

ite economist, Henry George, pointed out a century ago, inflated land values make the economy less efficient. They operate like a tax on the truly productive factors, labor and capital. Housing inflation has depressed our economy, frenzied our psyches, divided our society. A turnaround would be nerve-wracking, but no bad thing. □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WASHINGTON DIARIST

Shut Up And Sing

WHEN A FEW British pop stars formed an impromptu band in late 1984 to raise money for the Ethiopian famine, it was nearly Christmas. To the more jaundiced of observers, the sudden rapport of millions of British pop consumers with the plain-dwellers of southern Eritrea could be put down to seasonal guilt. The 1985 American version, USA for Africa—aiming to "Feed The World" regardless of the time of year—dispensed with that theory. Live Aid went further, cramming thousands of fans into New York and London stadiums to profess their undying solidarity with starving Africans by listening to the Bee Gees do an a cappella reprise of *Saturday Night Fever*. Farm Aid followed. Then Nelson Mandela's 70th birthday party, with a few million unexpected guests (and some ready cash for the ANC). And this month, the logical conclusion: a six-week world tour by, among others, the well-known moral philosopher, Sting, on behalf of Amnesty International. This time they've dispensed with the tired notion of raising funds altogether, so as not to confuse the politics with philanthropy. The event will merely "raise consciousness" about human rights. According to the organizers, it may even actually lose money. Never mind, Reebok has agreed to foot $10 million of the bill. The company's president told the *Washington Post* that the tour's objectives "dovetailed with our corporate philosophy." You can see the slogans in the Ivory Coast now: "Amnesty Lets U.B.U."

OVERLY CYNICAL? Maybe. It's tough to object to saving thousands from starvation out of an aversion to being preached at by someone who starred in *Dune*. And any event—however worryingly sentimental—that raises money for a good cause is *eo ipso* a good thing. But it's a closer call when the enterprise aspires to simple humanitarianism, like getting Nelson Mandela out of jail, but really involves something a mite more morally problematic, like buying bombs for the ANC. And it's particularly unsettling to see a pop singer, Peter Gabriel (author of the memorable lyric "I want to be your sledgehammer"), become the unappointed spokesman for the world's oppressed by mere association with Amnesty. Especially when, in one sentence, he can scrap decades of Amnesty's carefully won record of defending purely political rights with a statement like this: "The rich countries of the world are abusing human rights as much as anyone. We should put those issues of the homeless, the mentally ill, the unemployed onto the platform of human rights." The case for the defense, I guess, is that anything is better than nothing, that no possible harm can come from thousands of *Spy*-subscribing young executives occasionally getting a warm—even sincere—feeling about Belize. But there's a simpler question here: What sort of organization does Amnesty want to be? Its reputation was built on the belief that a few thousand dedicated, morally serious and politically hardheaded members were worth more than a stadium full of woozy Woodstock nostalgics. It earned respect precisely because it wasn't the kind of organization whose members needed Sting to remind them who Andrei Sakharov was. Now I'm not so sure.

THE OTHER VICTIM in all this, of course, is pop music. Once cheerful, diverting, and unpretentiously shallow, the music industry increasingly finds itself having to compete with Lukacs on the moral philosophy front. The results are inevitably a little pathetic. Live Aid kicked off the trend, spawning an entire batch of meaningful singers, whose urgent need for doing or saying something profound has been devastating to their art. U2 was excruciating enough, but the latest product of digitally remixed radicalism is the "folksinger" Tracy Chapman. The French magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur* (yes, we get it in the office) described her memorably last week—in a feature called "Rock: L'heure des prophètes"—as "jeune, révoltée et black." Maybe. Her fans aren't. She sells more albums than singles, enough in fact to put her at No. 1 on the U.S. chart. The CD sales are particularly strong. No doubt it has something to do with the lyrics: "Poor people gonna rise up / And get their share / Poor people gonna rise up / And take what's theirs" etc. This, you understand, from someone who herself won a scholarship to Wooster Prep School in Connecticut, went to Tufts, and is now on the cover of *Rolling Stone*. In the album, there's a long diatribe about how the police are responsible for domestic violence and what sounds like a defense of Al Sharpton: "Little black girl gets assaulted / Don't no-one know her name / Lots of people hurt and angry / She's the one to blame." Her predominantly white yuppie audiences shout "Talk to us! Talk to us!" during her concerts, to no avail: her precise politics are off the record. She has let it be known she supports Jesse Jackson, but her manager admitted to *Rolling Stone* that he tells her to stay silent between songs. Presumably, being specific might hurt sales: "I don't want to make it seem contrived on any level, because it's not. But is there a plan? Yes. Do we execute it? Yes." Her best lyric goes: "They're trying to make me into a white man's drone . . . But this one's not for sale." Still, in case you're interested, the CD's going for around $12.99.

THERE'S SOMETHING going on here: I was at Adams Morgan Day last week, my D.C. neighborhood's annual street festival. Once primarily Hispanic, black, and gay, the 1988 crowd was overwhelmingly prosperous, young, white, and straight. Gentrification, I suppose, as well as one more sign of the family values revolution among the white, ambitious young. But the atmosphere was still ostensibly "counterculture": reggae bands, leaflets for Cesar Chavez, Salvadoran cookouts, even the odd Joan Armatrading enthusiast. The combination was a little disorienting. Marijuana smoke wafted past polo shirts. Rastafarian bands played opposite a stand for cable television. Balloons floating next to the black dance-music group, Experience Unlimited, were sponsored by Merrill Lynch and Dale Denton Real Estate. But, oddly enough, none of it seemed particularly out of place. If there's a cultural swing to the left at the moment, it's managing to carry all the marks of the last eight years with it. This generation may now want a social conscience, but it's already got some money down on an Acura. In the great fin-de-siècle battle between the '80s and the '60s, the '80s are already setting the terms. The next revolution, when it comes, will be available on compact disk. It could even be sponsored by Reebok.

ANDREW SULLIVAN

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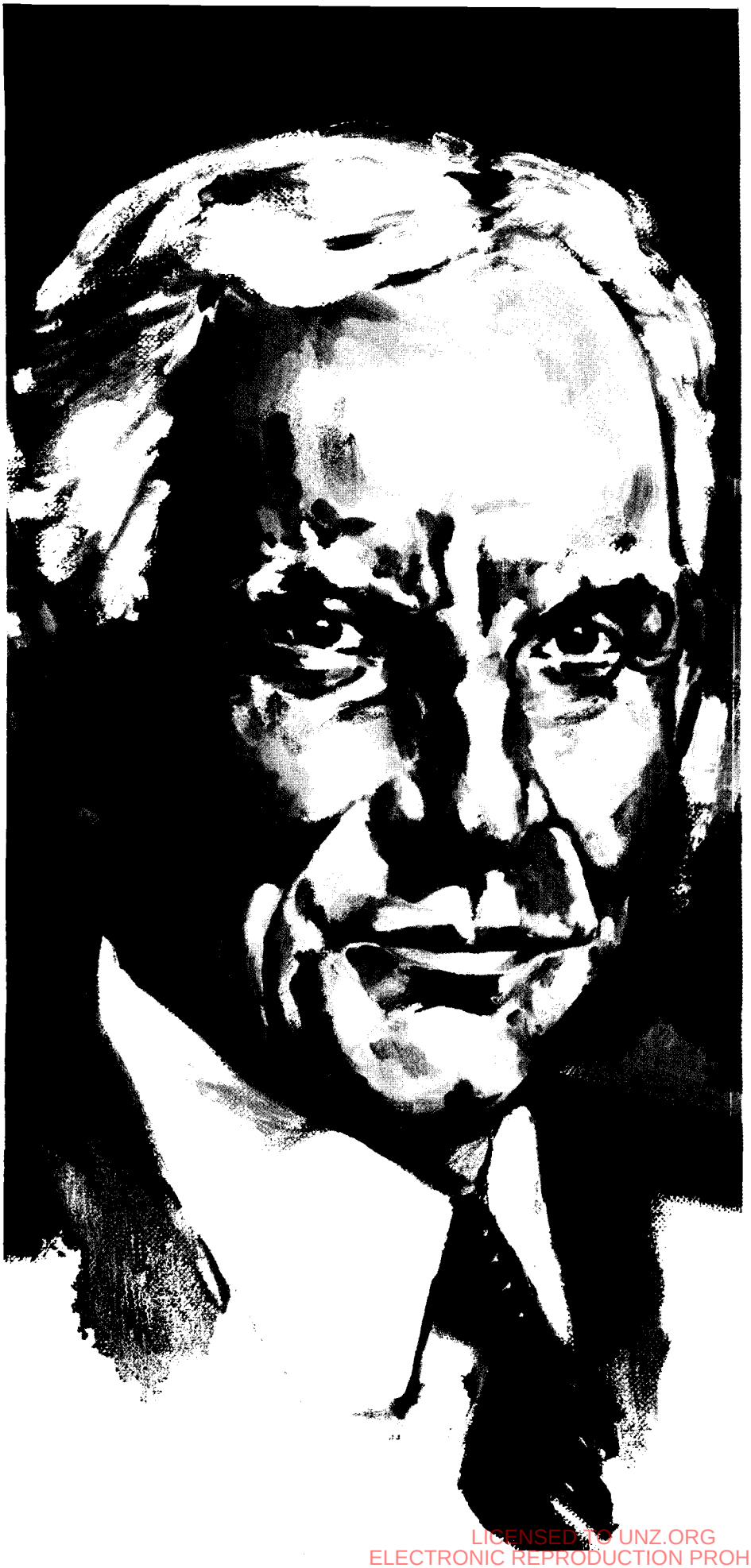

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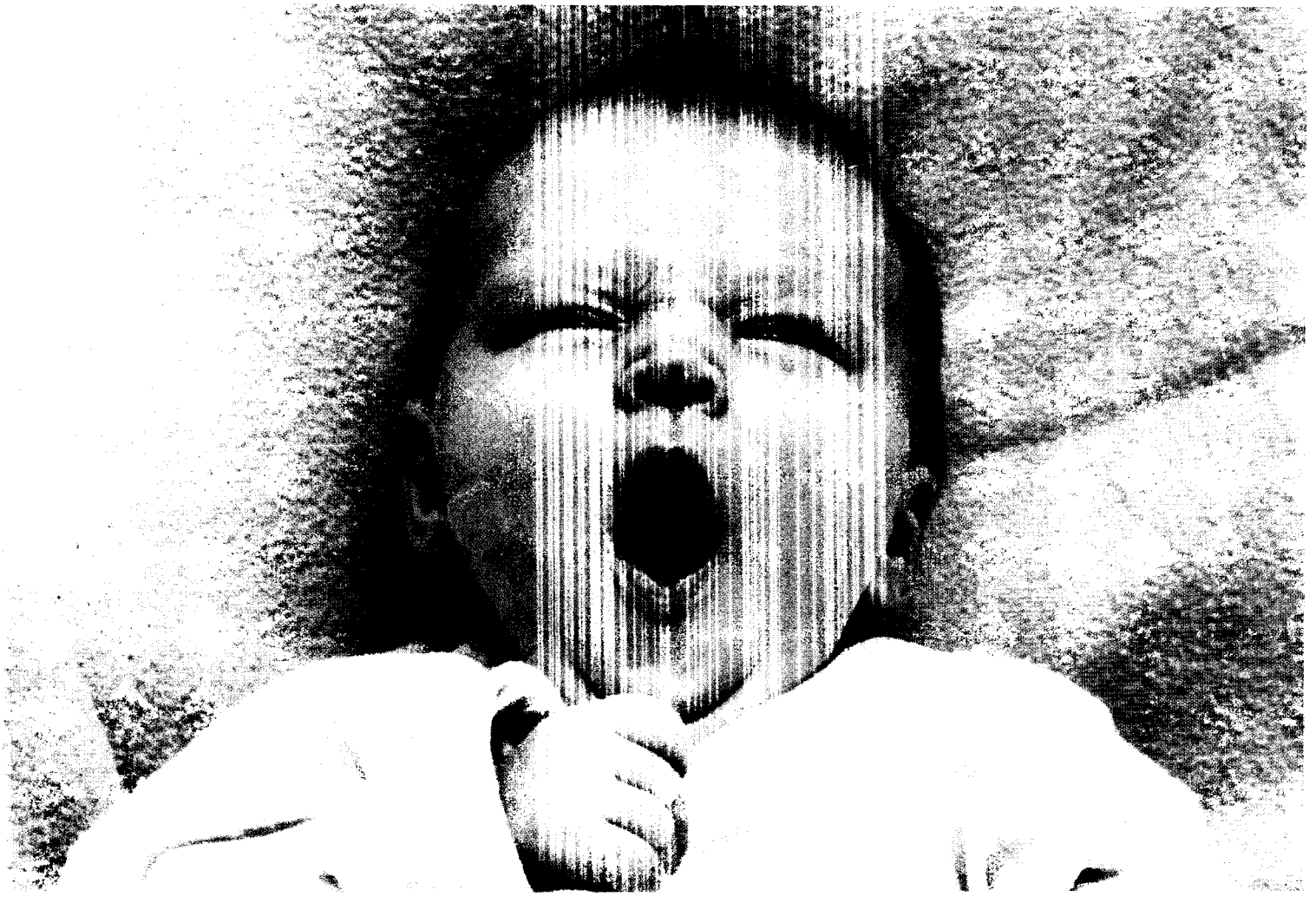

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